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BARENT CREIGHTON
A ROMANCE

BARENT CREIGHTON

A ROMANCE

NEW BORZOI NOVELS
SPRING, 1920

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RICHARD KURT

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DELIVERANCE

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THE TALLEYRAND MAXIM

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THE ROMANTIC WOMAN

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By Alfred Ganachilly

THE PATHWAY OF ADVENTURE

By Ross Tyrell

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

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BARENT CREIGHTON

A ROMANCE

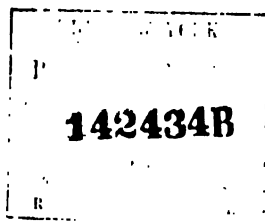
BY
DON CAMERON SHAFFER



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TO
JANETH
OF THE BIG HOUSE BY THE LITTLEST
RIVER AND THE ALMOST MOUNTAINS

PROEM

Rules and precepts, laid down as thus and so for the making of a book, to the contrary:

I shall ramble a-down the pleasant bypaths of narration as I see fit, pausing now and then to tell some insignificant thing, as well as taking time and ink to dwell upon the more serious incidents of historic yesterday, so sweet and dear to some of us, God wot! at this late day.

And I warn all, of high or low degree, here and now, that there is not subtly woven within these pages, simply a single lesson, no false doctrine bedight in tawdry fiction, nor yet so much as one carefully hidden, starched and strait-laced moral. If any excuse be necessary for such a book as this, it is, most assuredly, to entertain those (and they are not few,) who dearly love an old-time story of youthful romance and hot adventure, well seasoned (I hope!) with simple love and pleasant humour.

So those of you, my readers, who like problems in your fiction, who have acquired a foreign taste for didactics in your narratives, be forewarned. Turn not another page. Sigh if you must, but place this book back upon the shelf (you will find plenty there to your taste!) where it will joyfully await the eager fingers and the loving eyes of those who like a story for the story's sake alone.

DON CAMERON SHAFER.

Schoharie Court House, 1920.

CHAPTER ONE

HE who had conducted the legal affairs of our family for ever and ever so many years now laid aside his ink-stained goose-quill, adjusted a pair of silver-bowed spectacles on his thin, arched nose and picked up a time-stained document that crackled loudly in his shaking fingers.

"Master Barent Creighton," he began, somewhat hoarsely, though I was a man grown, "your aunt Abigail is dead."

I merely nodded affirmation, since Aunt Abigail's death was not news to me the fortnight, and more of regret than sorrow, inasmuch as we had always tolerated each other with polite cordiality, she being a staunch Free Methodist and I—oh, I was ever a red-headed Creighton!

He was very, very old was Lawyer Zodoc Goodrich, lean and seasoned, yet active and shrewd withal. Hard lines were bitten deep into his clean-shaven face, mottled parchment skin was stretched tightly over a bony forehead, and his white hair rolled like the curling edges of a February snowbank over his velvet coat collar. But when he spoke, fixing me the while with sharp black eyes peering o'er the silver spectacles, it was in a firm, convincing voice.

"By these instruments are the living bound to respect the irrevocable wishes of the dead," said he, very solemnly, as though to prepare me for the unusual things he well knew were about to follow.

I will not deny a certain pleasurable sense of satisfaction,

with all respect to Aunt Abigail, being next of kin and a beneficiary to one of the wealthiest women in all New York. And especially so, at this most opportune moment, when, for the lack of a little ready money, the High Sheriff and a prison cell were already taking form and shape before my very eyes.

Across the dingy little office, with its diamond glazed mahogany cupboards, its sagging chairs of worn brown leather, its frayed, brightly tinted rag-carpet rugs and unkept floor, its tables littered with leather-bound books and ink-scrawled papers, sat a little group of relatives from the Other-Side-of-the-House. They were duly garbed in sombre black, hollow-eyed and red-nosed, as mourners should rightfully be, yet with very large and worldly ears for the settlement of Aunt Abigail's vast estate.

Now this inner sanctum was divided from a more public office by a narrow walnut rail and behind this, standing close packed like sheep to a hayrick, were grouped numerous hungry-eyed tradefolk, nodding and whispering, with satisfied smirks and smiles, and other indications of good feeling, entirely foreign to such a solemn occasion.

Nervously I removed my doe-skin gloves, a cold perspiration of foreboding evil breaking out upon me, and dropped them into my grey beaver as Lawyer Goodrich cleared his wrinkled throat and continued:

"Barent Creighton, you being the last direct descendant of the Creighton family, I shall take up the settlement of your interests first."

Here he looked at me over the top of his "specs" and shook his white head sadly, as though I were but a poor stick to represent the last of an ancient and honourable house.

“*‘In the name of God, amen,’*” read Zodoc from the parchment in a firm voice. (But with mingled hope and dread, my mind in a veritable whirligig of apprehension, I caught only snatches of the legal form.) “*‘I, Abigail Creighton Ames, being sick and weakly, but of sound memory and understanding (blessed be Almighty God for the same). . . . On this day of grace, September the third, 1830. . . . do make and publish this my last will and testament . . . manner and form following . . . I give and bequeath to my prodigal nephew, Barent Creighton, a bunch of keys. . . .’*”

“What?” I cried, startled out of my lethargy.

“A bunch of keys,” repeated Zodoc almost in a whisper.

For he well understood my great need of money and that the mere mention of keys suggested to my anxious mind a fat Tammany turnkey jingling the metal tools of his calling in the gaol corridors of the Hall of Justice in Centre Street.

“A bunch of keys!” I exclaimed dubiously, as the Judge handed them to me, together with the quill to sign for their receipt. “Keys to what?”

“Keyholes, most like,” answered the Judge petulantly.

“Oh, keyholes, to be sure! I rather suspected as much from—er—the design and—er—general shape, but *what* keyholes?”

“To Pandora’s box, for all I know,” snapped the Judge. “It is not within my province to inquire into the nature of a legacy.”

This strange bequest consisted of four flat keys with curious notches, unlike anything I had ever seen before, a-dangle on a filigreed silver ring. But why they should be valued sufficiently to be mentioned in a will, except as a

jest, when no one knew what they were supposed to unlock, was entirely beyond my comprehension.

"Had my good aunt," I began sarcastically, "in a petulant and revengeful mood, desired to cut me off entirely, doubtless she would have willed me the keyholes instead."

"*'Item number two,'*" continued the Judge, paying not the slightest attention to my feeble wit, "*'a lacquered box containing seven small Indian manikins of curious workmanship.'*"

"What!" I cried, even louder than before.

"Seven little gold gods," repeated Zodoc.

"Oh, well," I sighed, "I only hope the god of bad luck is among them—I shall take great pleasure in breaking him up and melting him down."

There in their lacquered box were seven little Inca gods, barely three inches in height and hollow at that! I doubt if the whole seven weighed three Troy ounces. Withal they were but rudely cast in pale yellow gold and hideous of design. And one of the little devils, I bethought me at the time, (perhaps he who presided over my ill fortune!) actually grinned up in my very face!

"*'Item number three,'*" the Judge went on, as though anxious to get the ghastly business o'er, "*'a roll of old manuscript parchment in a leaden case, whereon is limned a sea sketch, the legend in an unknown foreign hand—'*"

I sank farther down in my chair, groaning aloud. A roll of manuscript sketches; an unknown foreign language! In truth, this was all a hideous jest to one so sore beset as I.

"Just the kind of a legacy a man in hard luck might reasonably expect from a breed of sailors," I commented. "Why didn't Aunt Abigail will me the entire family curio cabinet and h' done?"

"Your grandfather," explained the Judge, "seemed to treasure these things highly."

I could detect faint smiles among the mourning and an audible murmur of surprise arose from the group of spectators crowding the walnut rail.

This curious manuscript, designated as item No. 3, had once been sealed in a thin lead tube which had been clumsily opened with a sheath knife. I pulled out the sheepskin, its edges hardened and cracked, dirty and worn. Something my grandfather undoubtedly had picked up in the South Seas. The sketch showed a bit of the sea, not so crudely done, with the surf pounding upon the reefs, an island and a curious inlet faced by a promontory. And beneath this pen-and-ink drawing was a dozen or so lines of fine handwriting in an ancient script. Its entire value was, I judged, about a copper two-cent piece.

"*'Item number four,'*" read the Judge, while I was examining my inheritance, "*'five thousand —'*"

A mighty clamour drowned the legal voice as the spectators threw open the little gate and surged inside the walnut rail, shouting at the top of their voices.

"Here! Here!"

"A bill, a true bill!"

"Cash this order!"

"Pay me!"

"I have his note!"

"Give me twenty shillings!"

"I want my money!"

"Satisfy this account, sir!"

And much more of the same, well calculated to bring a burning blush of shame to the cheeks of a more hardened sinner than I. The Judge sprang to the defence of law and order, waving his thin arms in frantic protest and

threatening the invaders with his stout staff poised like a dragoon's sabre.

"Out, you vultures! You demmed money changers!" stormed he, forcing them back. "Out of here! Out of my office, every last beggar of you! Devil take me, what a bedlam! Begone, and stop tonguing like a litter of hound pups at feed time."

"The rogue owes me money!" protested one of the mob.

"Scatter my bones, but ye shall have it, to the last copper!" cried the loyal old Judge. "The Creightons have never questioned an honest debt, and their word is as good as their bond."

With bowed head I muttered my thanks, as they reluctantly withdrew to the hallway, although I was quite sure that the Creighton record for always paying bills was about to be shattered into as many fragments as the glassware of Alnaschar.

"The demmed money changers!" snorted the angry Judge in a hoarse voice, as he sank back into the cushioned depths of his huge leather chair, readjusted the silver-bowed spectacles with fingers that trembled more than ever, and stared at me reproachfully for a full minute before continuing.

"*'Item number four,'*" read he. "*'Five thousand acres of land in the township of Esperance, County of Dutchess, State of New York, known as the Von Laar patent; together with all leases, rents, implements, buildings, also the Manor House and contents—'*"

The mourners were weeping aloud now, sopping their wet eyes, overcome with grief for the departed. And, then again, it might have been because of the five thousand fair acres whose bounty had fattened them for so many years.

"*'To be held by the said Barent Creighton as trustee,'*"

BARENT CREIGHTON .

nished the Judge slowly, " 'as trustee'—*ahem!*—'for the'—*ahaw!*—'for—for the—wife of Barent Creighton.' "

"For the *wife* of Barent Creighton!" I stammered, with dry lips. "But, but, Judge—as much as Aunt Abigail hated me—she couldn't possibly do that!"

"My boy," said he, "there are no buts about it—she has!"

"But, but, Judge," I protested, "I—I—"

"In trust, for the *wife* of Barent Creighton," muttered the Judge, as he laid aside the parchment and fell to wiping the silver spectacles with a red cotton hanker. "Five thousand acres! In trust—wife of beneficiary—unusual, but perfectly legal, and she always would have you settled down!"

The old lawyer laid aside the spectacles, pushed the paper from him and struggled to his feet, blowing his nose violently.

"But—but, Judge—" I was still a bit confused. "I—I—you know, I have no wife!"

"Go and get a wife," advised the Judge gruffly. "You'll never need one more!"

"Aunt Abigail would ever have the latter end of a jest." (As badly as I needed money, I could not help but smile at Aunt Abigail's last little fling at her familiar enemy.) "And, and I thought she had exhausted every expedient and excuse to get me married. I marvel only that for once she permits me to choose the maid."

Never, never did I dream of such a grim joke as this legacy, so carefully worded to leave me exactly nothing of value from Aunt Abigail's large estate when I needed money so badly, and so well timed to force me into matrimony.

"The fortune your grandfather left you in ready cash at

the time of his death," accused the Judge, "you have sunk in this worthless steamboat venture of yours, when you ought to have stuck to the clippers."

I nodded and stared at the floor.

"Sunk, I believe is the right word to express it," said I. "What I did sink in the *Susie* certainly was sunk when she sank."

"Your father's money, you have blown—"

"Aye," another nod, "blown when the *Aphrodite's* boilers blew!"

"Your Aunt Abigail, reasoning from your past, evidently didn't care to trust you with the title to so much land. She seemed to foresee that instead of marrying and settling down, and keeping the Manor intact as a source of continuous income you would only sell it and sink the proceeds in your worthless steamboats."

"And she was quite right. Just at present I would sell all the land west of the Mississippi for \$25,000 in cash," I answered truthfully. "This five thousand acres is about as valuable to me, the way she has fixed it, as Manhattan Island, and my title seems to be just as good for one as t' other."

"Even the rents cannot be collected," he added sadly.

"They will be," said I. "Oh, they will be! Trust the trustee for that, if for no other reason than because I need the money!"

"Ho, ho, hoooo, the rents shall be collected!" burst out old Zodoc in goblin voice. "And for months and months me not getting so much as a Spanish shilling from my land in Rensselaer."

"But, why shouldn't the tenants pay their rents?" I demanded.

"Why? Why? Bless your soul and body, lad, for the

very best reason in the world,—because they won't—not a demmed one, sir, not a sixpence!"

It dawned upon me suddenly that I had seen something in the papers about Anti-rent riots but had paid little or no attention to the details and had all but forgotten that such a rebellion existed.

"The land tenants are up in arms against the patroon rents all up and down the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys and even into the hills and tablelands beyond," explained the Judge. "They say they have paid enough rent to buy their farms ten times over and they refuse to pay another cent."

"But, if they rent, why shouldn't they pay?"

"The patroons and land agents say they can pay or get out. They simply refuse to do either. Sheriffs, in trying to serve writs of ejectment, are met with armed men and hot tarbuckets. Poses of deputies are driven daily out of the hills by mounted and armed men. Land owners have fled to the cities for protection, and even now Governor Stewart is holding the State troops in readiness to put down a serious rebellion."

I awaited to hear no more of this cheering news. Satisfied that the evil genius presiding over my fortune was having a very good day of it, I tucked the lacquered box and the battered leaden tube beneath my arm, whistling a merry popular air the while, and smiled at my more fortunate cousins who remained to quarrel and quibble over Aunt Abigail's city real estate, the stocks and bonds and money to hand.

"Tomorrow," said I, my voice hiding the bitterness and disappointment within, as I pulled on the doe-skin gloves, "tomorrow I fare forth in quest of certain back rents, four keyholes, and a wife!"

CHAPTER TWO

LORD love us, Master Creighton, there's five o' them Lickpennys down there now, sir!" cried old Jepson from his point of vantage by the chintz curtained window, where he could look down into the busy street below. "An' old Jeremiah Hooper a-comin' up th' walk this very minute, sir!"

"Call it six and h' done," I answered drily, in a jocular way entirely foreign to actual feelings, as I slipped into a needleworked lavender waistcoat. For what business man, be he young or old, delights in having his doorstep warmed by hungry loan-sharks in the broad light of an October morning? "Jeremiah Hooper is the worst Shylock of the lot," I declared with emphasis. "He would sell his immortal soul to the devil and go to hades for the money on t' penny profit."

"Lord love us, so he would!" grinned the old servant, rubbing his bony hands. "An' so I guess we better be a-payin' of him, 'fore he claps us in th' debtor's prison."

"Pay him!" I cried, gazing at Jepson in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Aye, t' be sure," he answered easily, nodding and grinning, as though the mere paying of a few thousand dollars from a flat and empty purse was the simplest thing in all the world. "Pay th' old skinflint, an' th' rest o' th' harpies, an' send 'em sharp about their business, Master Creighton, or else they'll roost on our doorstep till doomsday."

"Pay him!" I echoed in a hollow voice, seizing upon brush and comb. "Why, Jep, don't you know that if old Hooper has to warm that cold stone until I pay him he is fore-doomed to a long and severe winter, else all signs fail!"

"Oh, Lord love us, Master Creighton, it can't be that bad!" gasped Jepson, as he realized for the first what a dire calamity had befallen the house of Creighton. "Didn't Aunt Abigail leave you anything, sir?"

"Just a little less than," I answered hotly, "and unless I can find the money to meet our notes and give us time to break the Bevens-Livingston monopoly of the Hudson River, so that we can run our steamboats, we are helpless, while these niggardly usurers, scenting my downfall, haunt the very door to discount their extortionate loans not yet due—"

Jepson's thin lips trembled o'er words he could not speak for dumb surprise and sudden grief; something besides the rheum of age sparkled in the wrinkled corners of the old man's faded eyes and ran a glittering course a-down each flaccid, sunken cheek. I stepped hurriedly to the window and threw up the leaded sash for, of a sudden, the very air seemed thick and stifling, and I was near a-choking. A flood of crisp, mellow October air swept in to revive me, bringing with it the harvest odour of ripening vegetation, commingled with the salt tang from the near-by bay.

High o'er all Manhattan the sun was suspended like a great radiant opal in a cloudless sky of hazy azure and the distant Jersey shore across the Hudson was but a thin grey line through the golden veil of autumn. Beyond the house-tops towered a forest of thin spars which marked the crowded shipping at the wharves along the waterfront. Below me the cobbled street was filled with noisy, lumbering ox-vans, piled high with boxes and barrels, with bales and

rolls and curiously marked chests of China tea, disputing the right of way with wood-wains and loaded farm wagons. It was a noisy, dirty street; narrow, flanked by high gabled houses, swarming with children, echoing with the clank and thud of shod hoofs and iron rimmed wheels.

Now, as I leaned out of the high Dutch window, breathing deeply and winking hard, I beheld a very thin, nervously active man, swinging along the flagging beneath me, shoulders back, head high, flapping one thin, tightly pantalooned leg with a pair of soiled gloves and gaily twirling a light bamboo cane. His frayed finery tried bravely to live up to swaggering, genteel pride and at the same time strove by every subterfuge to hide its rags and patches. The black beaver was worn and mangy, for all its rakish angle. His long-tailed blue broadcloth coat, shiny and all but buttonless, was once, perhaps, the most fashionable cut in town, though now sadly out of mode. His long face was dark and heavily lined, with narrowed eyes and bared teeth. He was comparatively young but the hair that swept his coat collar was snowy white.

A nondescript fellow he was assuredly, albeit not so very unusual in the great city of New York even in the year of our Lord 184—. And, as the fellow swaggered beneath my casement, he caught sight of the crowded doorstep and stopped dead in his stride for all the world like a well-trained pointer with the scent of a covey in its nostrils.

“Oh-ho!” he cried, in a loud, ringing voice, causing his thin cane to whistle mightily in the air. “Oh-ho, Jews and Jeremiah Hooper—ah!”

To my very great surprise and delight the loansharks cringed against the doorstep and turned their faces away, muttering to themselves as though they feared the whistling cane might dust their scrawny shoulders, while Jeremiah

Hooper, flushed of face, busied himself with a petty deceit of pretending that he had not noticed the fellow at all.

"Hum-ha!" ejaculated the Frayed One, in the same loud voice, the handle of his cane resting thoughtfully against his chin. "Hum! No. 1146 Broadway—ah! There is some one dead or dying when the ravens sit nearby, watching and waiting! My soul and body, yes! Jews and Jeremiah Hooper—here's a case at law *absento reo*, or I can't read the signs. Never mind, never mind, just leave it to *The Badger*—he'll be on hand to hold the dish when you let the fellow's blood. *Audi alteram partem*. No. 1146 Broadway—ah! Just leave it to *The Badger*—that's all!"

And with this he laughed loudly—teeth bared like a wolf's fangs, and flipped the bamboo cane under a thin arm, disclosing a yawning chasm beneath the sleeve, and thrust a bony hand into an inner pocket, producing a ragged piece of paper and a bit of pencil to jot down the address. With a final piercing, lowering look of scorn and contempt, which fairly made the loansharks tremble, he grunted in abject derision two or three severe "Hah's" and "Hem's" and went swaggering on down Broadway, flipping a thin thigh with the soiled gloves and gaily twirling his bamboo cane.

Marvelling much over this strange incident, and wondering who in creation *The Badger* might be, I turned about to find Jepson patiently waiting with my pearl-grey top coat, my bell-crowned beaver, my gloves and walking stick. I waved him aside—sick, discouraged, I refused to run the gauntlet of my creditors.

Then quite out of breath, his handsome face flushed with the exertion of getting past the ravens, my good friend Martinus Hadsell strode into the room. Here was a stalwart youth, dressed in the very height of fashion, from his

light beaver to polished Wellington half-boots, all grace and strength in his masculine duskiness, with black wavy hair, worn rather long, and large dark eyes. His long-tailed, tight-fitting, double-breasted, purple coat, was the latest cut, with the full skirt reaching well down his shapely legs and his waistcoat, very shaped at the waist, was delightfully figured. A high stock of black satin, the points of collar showing, and a stiffly gaffered shirt, marked him as a man of position.

"Great Jupiter and the god of war, Creighton!" he cried, casting stick and beaver upon the already overburdened table. "Has it come to this already? Must your friends fight their way through a regiment of note-shavers to reach your sacred presence?"

"I have but a few friends, Martinus, old boy," I answered sadly, seizing his loyal hand. "And I like to think that they would surmount even greater difficulties to come to my assistance."

"We'd fight fire and water for you, Barent," he answered gaily. "Go through Gehenna barefoot for you, Barent; and as for those buzzards, curse them! I sounded each and every one with my stick as I came in and there's no heart in them, their flesh is like curd. Oh, thunder and Mars, Barent, if the cursed fashions did not so run to tight clothes I'd have made the rogues pay dear for their seats—so help me, man, I would!"

"Perhaps they feel that they have paid dear enough as 't is," I ventured a sickly grin, remembering the stupendous amount of my indebtedness.

"Curse them! can't they wait until the debt is due?" answered Martinus as he flung himself into a chair and stretched at ease his weary body. "I've just dropped in to tell you, Barent, that there is no news—nothing. I have

been all up and down the town again, in the highways and byways, its streets and alleys; no man of means has escaped me. I've run 'em down in coffee houses and button-holed 'em on the street, and so far as I can find out, Barent, there isn't a dollar of good honest money in the whole United States of America—not a dollar!"

"There isn't a dollar for us, that's certain," I answered sadly.

"There is not so much as a copper penny in sight—not even a string of wampum. We have borrowed and begged our last cent and now that the money-changers know that we are in a tight corner they will not loan us even a plugged Spanish shilling. Barent, old boy, we're in the last ditch,—God help us!"

"With just thirty days outside of a debtor's prison," said I.

"They have us sewed up tight at every corner," commented Martinus, with a hopeless shake of his handsome head. "Our company is all but bankrupt, while our costly steamers lie rotting at their wharves in Jersey—all because we cannot raise a few dollars more to meet our notes and fight in the coming legislature this steamboat privilege which gives John Bevins and his fellow brigands an illegal monopoly of the entire river trade. We are caught hard and fast, and come the first of November, when those cursed notes fall due, we are doomed."

"We still have thirty days," said I hopefully.

"What good are thirty days when Bevins is determined to bankrupt and disgrace us, Barent?"

"He may strip me of every last cent, of everything except mine honour," I answered hoarsely. "But if John Bevins tries to disgrace me, then shall he pay for it with his life."

"Barent!" cried Martinus in alarm. "It would be

death itself to call him out—he is a very devil with the dueling pistol.”

“It is not a threat,” said I grimly, clenching my fingers, “it is more of a sacred promise, and when we meet, if ever we do, it will not be with pistols.”

“There is still one hope, Barent,—that five thousand acres in Dutchess County.”

“Why, Martinus,” I cried, “even the rents cannot be collected!”

Martinus pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

“Hang the rents, we need more than skipples of wheat and fat hens. The papers say that you hold this property in trust for your wife.”

“But I have no wife,” I protested. “It is only another of Aunt Abigail’s little jokes—”

“Auntie may not be quite so humorously clever as she thought,” interrupted Martinus. “Go and get a wife!”

“But I would have to be married!” I protested.

“Naturally—and, fortunately, ’t is easiest done of all the disagreeable things in the world. All one needs is a maid, a parson and a ring.”

“But the woman!” I cried, aghast.

“Thousands of them y’ know, right here in town, just aching to get married—and some of them not at all particular who, so long as ’t is a man.”

“But, but, can’t you understand, even marriage won’t give me title to the land.”

“This one shall, and dear old Aunt Abigail will perform sundry revolutions in her grave when she hears that your wife has deeded all this land over to you—for a certain sum of money—five minutes after the ceremony. We’ll attend to those little details in advance. I hate

to offer you up in sacrifice, but unless we have twenty-five thousand dollars mighty quick, we will be in gaol, or in our graves, and either might easily be far worse than a comfortable Manor home up the river with a kind and loving wife."

"Kind and loving fiddlesticks!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Most kind and loving twenty-five thousand," drawled Martinus, rolling the figures richly on his tongue. "Can't you see how very simple it is to beat the law and laugh at Aunt Abigail's pet scheme to get you married and settled down?"

"Martinus," said I very seriously, as the boldness of his plan dawned upon me. "Go you out and find me a woman, anything in petticoats legally able to marry, without regard for age, colour or condition of previous servitude. Arrange the horrible details at once and have her ready at Lawyer Goodrich's at three o'clock today, while I have the necessary papers drawn up."

"Have you no choice of females?" he laughed, clapping on his beaver. "Light or dark, stout or thin—"

"Only this—she must deed that land to me, for a price you will agree upon, immediately after the ceremony—and keep away from me for ever. What I want is a marriage certificate, title to that land and a mortgage for twenty-five thousand dollars—not a wife."

Just as Martinus started for the stairway, the old brass knocker on the street door rattled forth a mighty *clang-ity-clang-clang*, the voice of Destiny itself, had I but known it, and Jepson hurried down to reappear in half a minute, ushering into the room that ancient attorney, Zodoc Goodrich, with a robust, middle-aged, well-dressed countryman lagging ill-at-ease closely in his wake.

CHAPTER THREE

AHEM-ahem-m-ahaw!

Attorney Zodoc Goodrich, long our family advisor, stopped beneath the figured portières and coughed dryly behind a yellow, claw-like hand, as was ever his habit when something of moment burdened his mind to the point of speech. The old man's wizen, bowed figure was all but hidden in the clinging folds of an ancient storm cloak, although the day was cloudless, and he leaned heavily on a thick hawthorn cane. His sunken face, shaded by a wide black felt hat which he did not remove, being mindful of dangerous drafts on his bald pate, was wrinkled, senile and dried, but two shrewd, sparkling eyes of intense blackness peered out from beneath bushy white brows, giving a hint of the alert, virile mind within.

Ahem-ahem-m-m-ahaw!

"Well, Zodoc," said I, rather impatiently.

"Master Creighton," he began in a hollow voice, coughing again and tapping the floor noisily with his cane as he shuffled forward. "Master Creighton, allow me to present the Honourable William Henry Hartwell, Lord of Oakwood Manor in Dutchess County, and an old friend of your family."

"Oh, heavens!" snickered Martinus behind me. "A neighbour of yours already, Barent."

Puzzled beyond expression I stepped forward and seized the strong, rugged hand of the Honourable Lord of the Manor. Hartwell was big and round and muscular, of the true country type, a hard man at trencher and glass, a horseman, every inch of him, boistrous and breezy, sug-

gesting all outdoors. His iron-grey hair was cropped close to his round head and his florid cheeks were ornamented with close-clipped sandy side whiskers. He had on a suit of brown fulled-cloth, stirrup worn boots and a tan waistcoat with ivory buttons. That his business with me was of the utmost importance I could readily guess from the nervous way he handled his beaver and crunched his buckskin gloves in his strong fingers.

"Gad, sir! but I've been looking forward to this meet with pleasure, Mr. Creighton," he laughed noisily, closing upon my fingers like a fox trap. "I've had my eyes on you for years, I have,—watched the colt grow into his own, sir, and I'm mighty glad to shake your hand." He shook it very hard indeed, slapping me the while on the back with his beaver. "It's a fine and strapping young hunter you are too, sir. Dash my eye! Set up as a man should be who has to take the bars and ditches of life, sir—couldn't a been better if I'd a planned you myself. Uncommon wide in the shoulders and standing up with the best of them. Dash my eye, sir! yes, indeed!"

Here the Lord of Oakwood, to my very great embarrassment, chuckling loudly with delight, his mottled face beaming, stepped back a pace or two and looked me over very critically, from the toes of my half boots to the top-most red hair of my shaggy head, as though I were but another blooded animal he was about to add to his stable and he wanted to be quite sure that I was sound in wind and body.

"Er-er, I hope my looks satisfy you, sir?" I questioned with a rising voice.

"Exactly—to a dot, sir. Never saw I a better!" he chuckled deep in his huge russet throat. "Oh, dash my eye if I ever did, sir! Just the right line over the flanks and the knees well set and firm—"

"The nose is a bit large," I suggested mildly.

"Not at all—oh, not at all, sir! It's a good sign, dash my eye, yes—wind and strength!" He stepped to one side for a better view. "Fine, fine, sir; stamina and character, yes! Dash my eye!"

"Perhaps you do not care for a sorrel—" petulantly.

"Fire and spirit—but, who buys a horse for its skin?"

Fortunately Zodoc came to my rescue just at this time. Seizing me by the elbow with one gripping hand he led me, inwardly raging and furious, over to the open window where we could talk without being overheard.

"We've come up here on a little matter of special business," began Zodoc in a hoarse voice.

"To the devil with such business, Zodoc!" I exclaimed, angrily.

"A little matter of business involving some real money to hand—not unwelcome news, eh?" he continued, grinning up into my face, his black eyes snapping.

"Ah, yes, money," said I, calming down at once, for money was so very important to me just then.

"I thought that would make ye change your tune," he croaked.


"A little money just now might change failure into success."

"You're in a pretty tight hole, let me tell ye—pretty darned tight, eh?"

"Compressed somewhat around the edges," I admitted.

"John Bevens has your face jammed down in the mud, sir. Ah, a fine business man he is, always getting the money! Shrewd and calculating and cool he is, sir—"

"And crooked," I added, "else I would not be in a tight corner."



"Sunday-go-t'-meetin' methods are all right, my boy; they're all right on a Sunday, and in a church," he grinned. "But ye better leave 'em there, oh, ye better leave 'em there when ye go out into the business world of a week-day."

"Is there nothing fair," I cried, "and nobody honest, Zodoc?"

"Yes, yes, everything's fair in business, my boy, and the devil, at least, is honest about his work."

"I guess you are right, Zodoc," I answered sadly.

"You're all but done for, my boy, all but done for this very minute." Here he pulled me closer and whispered hoarsely: "But I've found the way to save ye, my boy, the only way—and a mighty good way, too, if I do say it myself. Remember, everything is fair in business!"

Here he winked one little black eye very mysteriously, tapped the floor with his hawthorn cane, and jerked a crooked thumb towards the Lord of Oakwood who was talking to Martinus.

"Can't ye see, Mr. Creighton, he covets that land up in Dutchess County!"

"But it isn't mine!"

"You can make it yours mighty quick," he added with superior knowledge.

Zodoc looked at me long and hard, he winked his bright little black eyes very shrewdly, he chuckled deep in his wrinkled and corded throat and tapped the floor impatiently with his staff as he continued.

"Oakwood Manor, as you should know, consists of five thousand acres of rich and fertile land adjoining your Aunt Abigail's property on the south. The two tracts together would make one of the largest and finest Manor farms in the State. For years and years this has been Hartwell's

one dream. He's tried to buy it time and again. He wants that land, and he wants it mighty bad."

"But I will have to get married, Zodoc!"

"Precisely—that's just it!"

"As soon as I can find the necessary woman to secure the title I will sell him the land at any reasonable figure."

"Old Money Bags is willing to do more than that," blinked Zodoc. "He will also furnish the woman!"

"The woman!" I cried.

"Exactly—his own daughter, an only child. Just think of that, sir!"

"I am thinking of it," said I, "very seriously."

"Oh, what a rare bargain!" breathed Zodoc, coughing behind his withered hand. "What a rare bargain!"

"An heiress with ten thousand acres is not to be made light of," I agreed, "but have you—have you any idea, any conjecture, of how this woman—this female—looks?"

"Not the slightest, sir. Never saw her in my life, and don't want to. But what difference does it make, even if she looks like the old hag Fury herself, when you must have twenty-five thousand dollars by November first, and when he wants the land and is willing to pay a fat dowery to boot?"

"None," I sighed. "Not the slightest bit of difference in the world, Zodoc. I'd marry her for twenty-five thousand dollars, if she was a hundred years old and as ugly as a Crotan squaw."

"He has just heard about your Aunt Abigail's will; read it in the papers," explained Zodoc. "He knows that the only way he can get that land is to arrange a wedding for you and his daughter. He wants it bad and he's willing to pay well for it."

"He'll have to," I answered. "I, er, make it a rule,

Zodoc, much as I enjoy taking long chances, never to marry unsight and unseen without plenty of boot."

"He has practically agreed to invest thirty thousand dollars in your company if this wedding can be arranged."

I turned away to look out of the window into the deep blue of the October sky, thinking only of my good friends, the men I had coaxed into my steamboat company with honeyed words and rosy promise, only to jeopardize their fortunes and their honour. If I could save them by this sacrifice, I argued, why should I hesitate? What difference did it make who I married? I did not turn around even when I felt the friendly arm of Martinus encircle my shoulders and I tried hard that he should not see the moisture in mine eyes.

"So the woman is found," said he.

"With far greater ease and dispatch than I thought," I answered.

And after this we stood in silence, looking out upon the busy street below where, undoubtedly, other grim tragedies of life were fast taking shape all hidden from our gaze, while, in the other corner of the room, Attorney Zodoc Goodrich and the Lord of Oakwood haggled over me, their bargain.

"Oh, yes, indeedy, he's a rare bit of a youth, Mr. Hartwell," Zodoc was saying in a hoarse whisper. "From one of the oldest families too; his great granddad was a Lord in old England, sir, and his grandfather was with John Paul himself. As true as I'm a telling you, and all the town will bear me out in it. Yes, indeedy! His own sire, you recollect, was once mayor of the town, sir. Oh, the Creightons have always belonged to the nobility—"

"Ah, it's the blood and breed that counts," commented Hartwell in a feeble attempt to hold his voice to a low

tone. "Look at the barrel of him and the angle of his shoulders. Oh, dash my eye, sir!—he'll make a rare mate for my filly."

"And the land, Squire, don't forget the land!"

"I'll stand a handsome dowery, I will, dash—"

And then, as I stood there with bowed head, gazing out of the window but seeing naught for the mist in mine eyes, Attorney Goodrich took from his inner pocket a bit of legal-cap, which he had evidently drawn up for the occasion, and read therefrom in a monotonous sing-song voice, which sounded strangely far away and muffled, the marriage agreement between William Henry Hartwell, Esquire, Lord in full of Oakwood Manor, in behalf of his daughter Ronella, as her father and legal guardian, and one Barent Creighton—a penniless failure of New York.

"—and the said marriage between Ronella Hartwell of the first part, by her legal guardian, William Henry Hartwell, and Barent Creighton of the second part, shall take place at Oakwood Manor within a fortnight from date, and on the day of the marriage of said Barent Creighton, to Ronella Hartwell, her father, Wm. Henry Hartwell, agrees to invest the sum of \$30,000 in the Steamboat Company headed by the said Barent Creighton—"

I scarcely know to this very day how I signed those papers, for my hand trembled as though with a sudden ague when I seized upon the quill and a foggy haze blotted my vision. But sign the hateful instrument I did, and in a bold script, and when this was done my future father-in-law made haste to seize me by the hand.

"There, by Gad, sir! that's done and over with, Mr. Creighton, and I'm proud to shake your hand sir," he cried in a loud voice. "I've known your family for years and years—blood and breed I've known 'em all—dash my

eye! Lived neighbour to 'em off and on and I'm proud of you as a son-in-law. I know a thoroughbred when I see it—from the ground up, sir. You've the right stuff in you for a stiff race and now that you are so nicely launched upon a successful business career—"

"Stop!" I commanded, as I realized for the first that the man evidently did not know what desperate straits I was in. "I don't deserve—"

"Tush—tish! hellitihoot, young man!" he roared. "Dash my eye, sir! Run up and see your bride-to-be and you'll forget everything else on earth, eh, Zodoc?"

"Yes, indeedy," cackled Zodoc as he hurriedly stuffed the papers into his pocket.

"Wait," I began.

"Come up for the week-end," called the Lord of Oakwood from the doorway. "Run up and get acquainted!"

Catching Hartwell by the arm Zodoc hurried him down the stairs, with unusual agility for one of his age, and before I could even begin to tell the man what a hollow fraud I was, and how he had been deluded about my ability and business standing, the street door slammed behind them and they were gone.

"Good heavens, Martinus," I cried. "I don't believe the man knows how close to the rocks I am."

"Why spoil his evening in town!"

"And I haven't the slightest idea what kind of a woman I have bound myself to wed."

"I doubt not," he grinned, "you'll sleep the better for it."

CHAPTER FOUR

NE’ER did guilty conscience awaken on the terrible morning-after with greater remorse or more poignant regret. Long hours of fretful slumber, wherein I was haunted by the grim phantom of my evil doing, and a terrible vision of old Zodoc leading in a broad-beamed, strapping, red-fisted wench, waving the while a signed and sealed marriage agreement before my burning eyes, filled the night with tremulous terror and I arose red eyed and in a sullen rage.

The sun was already high above the Island of Manhattan when I left No. 1146 Broadway, with no unwelcome guests haunting my doorstep—thanks to Zodoc and the newspapers, who had already spread the news of my money marriage—so I made my way, with heavy feet and clouded mind, to a familiar old Dutch coffee house where I ordered breakfast.

The rich ale ran bitter upon my tongue, the very odour of the crisp buckwheat cakes, the sizzling brown sausage, the steaming black coffee, failed to spur my reluctant appetite and I could not eat. Before my eyes, like the blazing handwriting on the palace wall, danced the shaky, inky lines of my name, *Barent Creighton*, scrawled across a marriage agreement which was cursed with falsehood and the taint of gold. Had I signed some unknown woman’s death warrant I could have felt no worse.

A man seated at a table near me—the only other occupant of the room—suddenly burst out in a peal of noisy laughter; it was not the laugh of mirth, but rather the voicing

of extreme and unexpected pleasure. For some unexplainable reason it irked me. I turned and looked at him—a tall, heavy boned man with long iron grey hair well down over his coat collar, a heavy featured face lined and seamed, tanned, dark and sinister. It was all too evident that his loud and mirthless laughter was provoked by something he had read in the *Morning Star*. I looked closer and by the very position of the paragraph in question, in relation to the page, I recognized the article and knew that he had just read the newspaper account of my recent legacy—truly a great jest and one which made the whole town roar for a week!

I flushed and grew suddenly incensed—angry with an unknown because he laughed at my misfortune, but the stranger only bent over his page, sipping black coffee, and carefully read the bit of humour again. It was then I noticed that the forefinger of his left hand was missing. God's love, thought I, let him roar, 't is seldom enough a good joke emanates from the Surrogate's office!

And, as I half started from my seat to inquire into the fellow's hilarity, there flashed across my heated brain the faces of those true and loyal friends who had trusted me. Ah, what of them? Either I must raise this money, by fair means or foul, or they would be buried for ever in the ruins of my tottering business. A few thousand dollars and just the right kind of a lawyer, I mused, one who could not be purchased nor influenced in any way by my enemies, and we might yet break that illegal monopoly of the Hudson which Bevens and his greedy followers so richly enjoyed while our steamers grew heavy with barnacles at their weathered wharves in Jersey.

In this tumult of thought over my untasted breakfast the street door opened softly on its hand-wrought hinges and

in slipped a gaunt figure of a man clad in shiny blue broadcloth coat of ancient cut, in threadbare trousers, cracked boots and a mangy beaver tipped at a rakish angle. In one thin, bony hand he clutched a pair of soiled gloves and a light bamboo cane was tucked under his arm. His face was thin and angular and his hair was snowy white. It was the same nondescript fellow I had noted the morning before threatening the loansharks beneath my window. Catching sight of me he doffed the old beaver and bowed most politely.

"Ah, good morning, sir. Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Barent Creighton?"

"A very doubtful pleasure," I assured him.

The fellow who had been roaring over my misfortunes as set forth in the *Morning Star* whirled around and stared me out of countenance. I gave him a look that well advertised my belligerent state of feeling. And at this the insolent knave laughed again, loud and mirthlessly, and stalked out of the place with the torn page from the paper in his mutilated hand.

Here one of the bar maids came hurrying up as though she knew my visitor for a tag-rag adventurer and had no wish to see me disturbed at breakfast, but I motioned for her to leave the fellow alone.

"Once, sir," said the gaunt stranger in a soft voice, standing very stiff and straight, "in this very house, sir, the maids would rush to find me a seat—now they would as quickly throw me out. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*"

"And next month they probably will throw me out," I answered grimly. "Be seated, brother of misfortune."

"Ah, misfortune is just what I came to see you about," he sighed. "You are, I believe, in some little trouble through business entanglements?"

"Trouble!" I exclaimed. "What do you know about trouble—and my trouble in particular?"

"Young man," said he, with a flourish of his thin arms, "while you are just now learning the A-b-abs of trouble I am taking a postgraduate course. I know all about trouble—everything. Bless my soul and body! Trouble and I are one, we sleep together—sometimes; dine together—when it can be said we dine at all, and stand loyally by each other through thick and thin—mostly thin. And, as for your private stock of business trouble, which is not real Simon-pure trouble at all, I happen to know all about it, every last detail—trust *The Badger* for that, sir."

"Ah, *The Badger*," said I.

"The same," said he, with a smile and a bow.

Saying which he dropped into the vacant chair on the other side of the little oak table and gazed with wide-eyed hypnotic fascination at the food I had been unable to touch. There was famine writ large in the deep lines in his face and wolfish hunger glittered in his sharp eyes.

"It is paid for and untouched," said I. "If you have not breakfasted finish it and be thankful for a good appetite."

"Appetite!" he cried, staring at me in astonishment. "Oh, my soul and body! Young man, you have yet to learn that appetite is something to be thankful for only when one has the means to hand for satisfying it—then it seldom exists."

He speared a brown sausage with a fork and his thin hand fairly trembled as he strove to conquer the dire want within that fain would stop not for table manners or the niceties of etiquette. I noticed, as he ate, that my strange table companion had once been a fine looking fellow, though now starved into a mere skeleton of a man. His fluency in

language evidenced a good education. Trouble, worry, and privation had already seared deep lines into his gaunt face. Only the bright blue eyes remained sparkling and full of fire and life.

"And why do you style yourself *The Badger*?" I asked.

"It's all on account of the law, sir," he answered with a smile as he pushed back his empty tankard.

"Ah, then you know something about the law."

"Ha, there you have it, sir!" he exclaimed. "I know this much about the law, sir—that it's as full of holes as a Swiss cheese—and I can find the holes, sir!"

"It is more like a sieve," I added thoughtfully. "The law, sir, is made by lawyers, and poor ones at that, who take ample pains to leave plenty of holes so that they can slip out with their dignity and their client's money."

"*The Badger* can find the holes, sir. Trust him for that!"

"And who, may I ask, is *The Badger*?"

"Once a long, long time ago, and still it was but a few years, there were no hollows in my face, no snow in my black hair and I was a rising young attorney with a name, sir—oh, a fine and high-sounding name, sir!" he answered in a voice grown suddenly harsh and cold as he leaned over the little table, fixing me with his flaming eyes. "And there was a wife and a neat little home above the city, sir— Ah, but that was a long, long time ago, —fifteen years, maybe—or twenty—a century—an eternity! And today I am *The Badger*, a pettifogger, a shyster, a baiter of Jewish dogs in Police Court, stripped of everything but pride,—robbed of home, wife, fortune, all! Denied everything but hate and death—"

"Don't," I begged. "Please don't!"

"There was a man—a young man, sir," he continued, as

though he had not heard me. "Handsome as the very devil he was." The fellow's eyes, warmed by the heavy ale, blazed like bluish flame. "He was a friend and I trusted him, but his heart was cold as ice—and—oh, but it's the old, old story! Ha, ha ha, hahahahaaaa," he laughed bitterly. "I trusted him—and her!—oh, God!"

And the way this last word fell from his bloodless lips left me in doubt whether he meant it for a prayer or a curse.

"Enough—enough of my private troubles!" he cried, straightening up with a jerk, and shaking his white locks. "I came here to offer you my legal assistance in your hour of trouble, not to solicit breakfast and sympathy. The former I can go a long while without and the latter is a stranger once a man is down."

"To offer me your legal aid," I repeated.

"To save you, my friend, from the damned bloodsuckers and Jeremiah Hooper *et al.* Just trust your case with *The Badger* and he'll take care of those birds."

"I have no case," I answered.

"Leave it to *The Badger*—he'll make one."

"And no money."

"Money and I are total strangers," he grinned. "I have learned to do without it, like the barbarians of old."

"Nor yet any credit," I owned.

"Except that my clothes are older and my waistcoat flabbier we are very much alike," he smiled. "Ah, very much alike!"

"Differing only in degree," said I. "But what want you with my worthless case and no retainer to be had?"

"I ask nothing but a chance," he pleaded earnestly. "You have nothing to lose and all to gain. But give me the case, sir—I know how to win."

While I was most interested in the peculiar fellow and his pitiful story I must confess that I believed not a word of it and judged him one of many shyster lawyers who made a precarious living ambulance chasing in the City Court, and who grafted his meals, whensoever he could, with the same sad tale, off innocent and sympathetic strangers.

"I thank you, Mister—Badger, for your kindly interest," said I, leaving the table. "But I guess I am past all legal help."

"Never, sir, never; only let me—"

Here I reached into my waistcoat pocket and drew forth a silver two shilling piece and tossed it upon the table towards him.

"For your next meal," said I, picking up my hat and stick.

Instantly his thin face went scarlet and then, quite as quickly, flashed to a deathly white. With an oath he sprang to his feet, banging the table with the clenched bones of his fist so that the empty dishes jumped and rattled and the bright silver coin rolled upon the floor.

"Sir! sir! How dare you insult me!" he roared. "Damn such insolence, sirrah! How dare you!"

Astonished at this display of temper coming from such an unexpected source, I scarce could find tongue to answer.

"I humbly beg—" I began, but before I could finish he had shamed me with a terrible look and with head high stalked to the door and slammed it noisily behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMPTY pockets are responsible for more desperate and dangerous men than all the other world-old excuses fused into one. With mine but poorly lined with small change winnowed from my friends, as trustee of Creighton Manor, I determined to journey thither and collect enough back rents to live comfortably 'til my wedding day or know the reason why! And there was every reason why this wedding day of mine should be hastened as much as possible.

When you remember that I was reasonably young and fairly desperate, six foot and thirteen stone, red headed and well used to trouble; that I had to do or die in somewhat less than thirty days, you will understand why I set out so hurriedly on this mad adventure, on the Albany Post Road, to the township of Esperance, which is in the County of Dutchess, the State of New York.

I confess also, aside from all monetary reasons, a certain amount of curiosity to see the young woman whom I, in desperation, so blindly had bound myself to wed—for a consideration! Not that it made the slightest difference how she looked, but, as youth will, I hoped for the best. There were other, really important reasons, why I did not care to linger in the great city of New York, which is the worst place in the world for a man out of funds.

Even from the safe prospective of advanced and more sober years it seems not strange that amid all my troubles I had quite overlooked this Anti-rent War which now had

the entire commonwealth by the ears. For self-centred, urban folk take but little interest in rural troubles, having quite sufficient of their own. But now that I held in trust some five thousand of these contested acres, with back rents a-plenty for my empty pockets, I was interested at once. It was all of a piece in my devilish luck that the very moment when I needed money most was just the time when my tenants should refuse to pay rent!

Therefore, 't is that I set out on my strange journey, via the Albany stage, at cockcrow of a Wednesday morning.

It was a wonderful day to ride—even for a man haunted by an uncertain fate and threatened with an unknown wife. The coach was large and commodious. Though boot and top were piled high with mail bags and travelling boxes, there were but few passengers from town to town.

The road bed was just the right firmness for fast travel, the day soft and warm and balmy, with the flame and gold of autumn tinting the foliage along the rocky edge of the Palisades which towered above the shimmering Hudson. White-winged sloops tacked to and fro across the broad river and the gay steamers of our hated rivals spouted black smoke and cinders as they steered straight up the channel for the distant port of Albany more than a hundred miles away. The well-travelled road rolled gently up and down the hills and valleys to the east of this mighty river, by pleasant farms, through sleepy little villages and along broad fields of nicely cultivated land. Now it wound beneath the green arches of the trees and now it ventured down near the lapping grey water of the river or swung back against the rocky foot of the broad hills. The mellow haze of autumn, in dainty pinks and softest lavenders, touched the tops of the distant hills and melted into golden blue along the western horizon.

That night I housed in a two-story brick tavern some thirty miles above New York where I found crowded accommodations, it being just at the season when country agents were hurrying to the city for the sale of produce. I was fortunate in securing a large and commodious room on the second floor front—a room all too evident of recent occupation by some female member of the family, crowded out for the night to help swell the family profits. Which is to say that it was a neat room, with figured paper, tinted curtains and a bright rag carpet. The splint-bottom chairs were comfortable, the dresser top held many small jugs and vials of cosmetics. But best of all was the high bed, with its great husk mattress and billowy featherbed. So tall was it that a little three-step approach was provided for one to gain access to the homespun sheets and patchwork quilts.

The bar-room was noisy, the reading room was crowded, and I had not been sleeping well of late, so I retired early. Perhaps it was the crisp country air, perchance it was my long ride, but certain it is that for once the imps of wakefulness ceased to torment me and I dropped into a sweet unconsciousness soon after I had climbed into the high four-poster, its cords a-creaking pleasantly.

It was long past midnight, and very dark, when I suddenly opened my eyes, sensing another presence in the room. I awakened easily and gently, without a stir, my eyes searching the darkness of the room and the faint grey shadows by the windows. Whether it had been some slight sound, or the pungent odour of a sweaty man in my nostrils, that awakened me I know not. At first I was prompted to believe that I had been dreaming, startled into wakefulness by the vividness of my dream, but there was still the undeniable acrid odour of perspiration, then I dis-

tingly saw a black shadow float across the dull grey of the window. I was not afraid—I did not call out. The next instant a lucifer flared up, lighting the half of a man's masked face, touched the candle wick and the room was illuminated.


Smiling down at me, in manner bold and debonair, was an oldish sort of fellow, as near as I might judge, wrapped in a long grey travelling coat, with a cocked derringer in his hand.

"Sorry to disturb you, matey," said he in a low, gruff voice. "In this business we try to inconvenience our customers as little as possible. Your breathing told me you were awake and I struck a light so you wouldn't attempt any funny business."

"I'm not feeling very funny," said I stiffly.

"Don't," said he. "I'd awfully like to kill a practical joker."

He was small and thin, with a black mask covering most of his face which was further shadowed by his black brimmed felt hat. But his very attitude, standing wide legged, head thrust forward and down, bespoke a cool and cruel man, evidently of the sea, schooled to desperate and devilish things. Two bright eyes glittered from the mask holes, his lower cheeks, dark and weather tinted, wrinkled into pleasant lines; the hand holding the pistol, so steady and dangerously cool, was small and delicate. He was breathing hard, and beads of sweat stood out upon his chin, upon which I noted a peculiar nick as though a cutlass or creese had bitten there. But by the grey hair at his temples, by the wrinkled skin on the back of his hands, I saw that he had grown along in years at his nefarious profession.



I started to sit up.

"Back water, bucko!" said he, laughing low and merrily. "Come about and lie still; ye might catch your death, with the ports wide open and the night air so cold and damp!"

"I am glad my health interests you," said I, "along with the other things of mine."

"Cool, young man, cool; and always respect a China typhoon and a pistol," he warned, "you will note that it is one of the new percussion locks," referring to the der-ringer, "and we will come to those other things anon."

"My dear Captain Kidd," began I, as the humour of the situation dawned on me, "I fear you have made a terrible mistake."

"Not I," said he. "Not a chance—I don't ride twenty miles on a tough-bitted horse to make a mistake. And, besides, you are very like your grandfather."

"You're certainly in the wrong room."

"I'm certainly on the right course, my hearty!"

"The proprietor sleeps next door."

"You're missing stays," said he. "And the hostler sleeps aft in the stable."

"Most any of these drovers have more money than I."

"You have exactly what I want!"

"My dear Captain, it can't be that you understand just how frequently and thoroughly I have been robbed of late."

"I know all about that, too," he nodded. "You have my sympathy."

"Well, anyway, you are the first to rob me without pretence of law."

"None the less thorough, I trust."

"But what in the world do I possess of sufficient worth for any man, however little he values life and liberty, to risk both by breaking into my room at midnight?"

"Young bucko," began he, "I fain would rob you of your recent inheritance—"

I laughed aloud; laughed until the bed cords joined in my mirth.

"Stow that," frowned he. "Hold hard—I can assure you this is no laughing matter."

"I cannot help it—ha, ha, ha—when I try to imagine—ha-ha-ha—any one poor enough to see value in this inheritance of mine!"

Here he pulled a wrinkled and soiled newspaper from his coat-tail pocket and addressed me as follows:

"Lay off on that! You have, I believe, a bunch of keys."

"I have, 't is true, a bunch of keys, but I regret to state that the keyholes have been mislaid."

"I think I can find 'em," he nodded, reading. "Seven Inca idols in a lacquered box."

"Miniatures of little Indian gods of small things in general—including the pot-bellied god of bad luck—hardly enough gold to make a double eagle."

"And a certain manuscript written in a foreign tongue."

"A bit of pen scratching by a foolish sailor which no one can read."

"I think I know who can read it."

He took the keys from my coat pocket and twirled them nervously on his forefinger. "Jakie's got another set," said he, as though speaking to himself as he threw them on the table. He opened the lacquer box and examined the Indian curios. "Ah, a fair sample, a fair sample!" exclaimed he, as though he knew a great deal. Then, with a heavy sigh, as a gambler risking all on a certain card,

with trembling fingers he drew the stained parchment from its battered leaden case and bent eagerly toward the candle.

"That's it!" he cried. "By th' roarin' forties, that's it!"

"In order that I may fully appreciate my loss," I jested, "you might at least tell me what it is all about."

"It's a bit of adventure," he laughed, "having to do with blood and gold, smelling strong of the sea; a log of strange lands and stranger people."

"Sunken treasure?"

"No," said he. "It's high and dry!"

He was tossing my buckskin money pouch in his left hand.

"Your business evidently has its disappointing moments," said I.

"It's fairly heavy," said he. "Fairly heavy!"

"Mostly silver and coppers," I confessed.

"Nigh fifty dollars, I should say."

"Somewhat less," said I. "Take it and begone, I desire to sleep. What's fifty dollars to a man who has already lost three full fortunes?"

"Not much, that's a fact," he laughed in his quiet way. "You're a good fellow, though most unlucky, and if I didn't need money so badly—"

"If you need it half as badly as I do I feel sorry for you."

"You'll have plenty more in a few days," he chuckled, "and a bride to boot!"

"Now, by heaven," said I, sitting up, "you quite overstep the bounds of hospitality!"

"Easy," cautioned he. "Back water, mate—you might burst a blood vessel—or I might have to break one for

you. Keep cool and calm, young man, you'll have trouble and danger soon enough without risking your neck to-night."

With the manuscript tucked safely in his inside pocket he backed toward the window.

"You have forgotten the most valuable part of your loot," I reminded him.

His hand flashed to the pocket containing the parchment.

"No," said he, "I'm not that careless."

"The gold gods," I explained. "That one in particular—the knock-kneed, pot-bellied fellow with a grin, I'm certain he is the very incarnation of bad luck."

"Oh, keep 'em," he laughed. "There's plenty more where they came from."

With this he laughed merrily, though not loudly, and drew his great grey coat about him as he blew out the candle. I heard the window click, heard the grip of his hands on the upper balcony as he swung himself down and out into the night where darkness and the tough-bitted horse made capture impossible.

So, as I say, being well used to being robbed, I turned my face toward the wall, made my tousled red head more comfortable on the soft pillows and dozed off into pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER SIX

THE glorious October sun, radiant with rosy light, smiled friendly down o'er the heights to the east. We were far from being strangers, this early morning sun and I, albeit, more oft it greeted me going home than walking out!

The rich, chromatic light, tinting the very air with fairy brightness, beat upon a gossamer morning mist of rosy hue which so delicately veiled the silvery Hudson. The balmy morning air, fresh and sweet, fragrant from the dew-drenched earth, was delightfully cool withal, and every deep intoxicating breath set the heart pounding madly, made the flesh to thrill and quiver with excitement and led a truant mind far afield, into a fair dreamland where excited imagination whispered of mad adventure.

The coach left the inn promptly at five o'clock—perforce without me. My nocturnal visitor had left me scarce a copper. I had to settle my tavern bill with my travelling trunk. My robberman had taken the lead covered manuscript so I was relieved of its weight, but the keys and the golden trinkets I dropped in my pocket, confident, from the hint the fellow had given, that they were all sinister instruments of fate with some definite purpose, perhaps known or suspected by Aunt Abigail.

Determination and stubbornness are all of a piece with red hair. I had started out for Creighton Manor, in the township of Esperance, County of Dutchess, and go there I would—if not by coach then on Shank's mare. But if I must walk I determined not to be in any hurry about

it. Penniless vagrants, I reflected, usually take their time from village to village.

So I scribbled a long letter to Martinus, telling him of my monetary loss, and urging him to bring additional funds, if he had to rob a bank, to tide me over until I could lay my hands on some delinquent renter. I promised myself that the methods employed by the last individual to relieve me of my cash would be fair and gentle compared with those I would use when I got a chance at my Anti-renters.

After all, walking has its compensations. It was far better than being cooped up in an old coach swinging drunkenly on its leather springs. Now I could stop when I wished and not at the whim of a half-witted driver. I dallied along the way as I saw fit, picking a wild aster under a stunted pine, stopping to lean on a rail fence while I listened to the bell-like notes of some dainty wood bird or lounging on a rustic bridge to watch the crystal waters of a mountain stream leaping the worn stones. And on moss-covered rocks I dallied to fill my pipe and smoke while the grouse drummed in the nearby woods and the noisy squirrels called back and forth through the tree tops.

The sun reared ever higher in the blue, flooding the green outdoors with sunshine soft and white. The south-wind died down to the merest whisper of a breeze, with the odour of moist earth and many sweet smelling herbs. Ah, this very road, thought I, surely leads straight to Happy Valley where there is surcease of sorrow, an ending to trouble, where life begins anew and there is love and sweet content for ever and ever!

By this you will learn that, oft-times, the fairest highway leads most direct to the Land of Trouble and it is no easy task, be sure, to tell the Straight-and-Narrow from

the other and more tortuous road of life. For soon my daydreams, as I sat a-smoking, were rudely shattered by the raucous voice of some country yokel singing a most villainous song to a ribald, impossible tune.

"The moon was shinin' silvery bright,
The Sheriff came at dead o' night;
High on th' hill an Injun true
An' on his horn a blast he blew—

Get out th' way, big Bill Snyder,
Or we'll tar your coat an' feather your hide, sir.
Get out th' way, big Bill Snyder."

He came swinging out of a woodland path, sing-songing this doggerel chorus, and stopped instanter at sight of me, narrow eyes staring, cavernous mouth agap. He was a brawny, red-headed giant, in a checkered shirt, without ruffle or collar, and hickory-brown tow-cloth pants tucked into worn cowhide boots. His huge muscled face and corded neck were a mass of great brown freckles, as were his big knuckled hands and bony wrists, and, as I looked, I noticed that his left eye, under its shaggy red brow, was somewhat swollen and discoloured as though from recent combat.

"Oh, ho!" roared he, "maybe ye don't like my singin'?"

"It gives me no offence," smiled I, puffing away. "Sing on, my tuneful friend, and it please you."

"Maybe ye don't like th' words t' that 'ere song," cried he, louder than before, wrinkling his bushy red brows up and down and bunching his huge fists. "Maybe ye take some eck-ception t' it—heh!"

"The words are perfectly meaningless to me," I explained. "But I have long grown accustomed to hearing foolish words set to music."

"Foolish be they!" he shouted, sticking out his jaw. His teeth were very big and yellow. "Ye say as how they be foolish, eh? Then maybe you've got somet'in' t' say 'bout th' rent!"

Something to say about the rent! I wondered what the pugnacious fellow was driving at. "Why, I haven't paid my rent in so long I had quite forgotten there was any such thing."

"Then, b' cricky, I'll make ye think o' it!" he exclaimed, hissing the words through thick lips. "Do ye say *Up With th' Rent* or *Down With th' Rent*?"

Evidently the fellow was determined to pick a quarrel with me. Some town bully, thought I, who has gotten the worst of a trial of strength and now seeks revenge on me. I knocked out and pocketed my pipe before answering.

"I have not yet learned to say either."

"Oh, haven't ye?" he growled. "Then ye better learn right now," he affirmed. "Folk that walk this here highway these days do be a-sayin' one er t'other, an' they usually says it mighty quick."

It was evident, from his belligerent attitude, that I had to do with one of the rent war partisans I had heard so much about. I had no desire to engage in a fight and, not knowing which side he took in the controversy, made haste to avoid trouble by hazarding a guess.

"Well, my fine fellow," said I, "if you must have one or t' other, I will say that the rent question can proceed in a general descending direction straight to the bottom of the pit for all I care."

He stopped in the middle of the road, scowling savagely, head lowered, eyes glaring, his huge red face drawn into

sober lines, rocking slowly back and forth on his broad toes, as though deeply affected.

"Ye mean *down* with th' rent?" he questioned, licking his dry lips.

"Quite so," I affirmed. "*Down! Down! Down!* with the rent!"

"Huh! Then why didn't ye say so?" he growled angrily. "What do ye want t' keep a-tantalizin' me for—"

"I have just said so," I answered pleasantly. "But I will say it again and it please you."

"Huh," he grunted sullenly. "You're th' most disappointmentest man I ever met up with, ye be. I wus a-wishin' an' a-hopin', ever since I see ye a-sittin' there, that ye'd say *Up With th' Rent.*"

"And supposing I had said *Up With the Rent!*" I inquired with great curiosity.

"Cause if ye had, sir; if only ye had a said it, as I felt mortal sure ye wus a-goin' to, from yer ugly looks, I'd a knocked yer red head plump off, so help me crickey, I would."

Whereupon I laughed heartily as I got to my feet.

"If the sight of red hair offends you," said I, "then best never look in a mirror."

"'Tain't but a bit sandy!" he affirmed petulantly.

He pulled off his battered wool hat to prove his point and I swear his hair was of the reddest.

"Then mine is but a bit coppery in the high lights," I laughed. "While your hair is as red as a pickled beet and I swear I could light my pipe with a lock of it this very minute."

"Light ye pipe, could ye!" bawled he, cracking his huge knuckles and dancing up and down with rage. "Red as a

beet, be it? I'll show ye whose hair be th' reddest!"

With this he rushed upon me and nothing but the nimblest foot work saved me from instant annihilation as his huge fists lunged by my head. His rush carried him well past and as he went by I planted my fist upon his ear, but the blow hardly staggered him. With a wild bellow of rage he turned and we were at it hard and heavy. Safety was as near his great body as I could get, away from the swing of his long arms. With all his brute strength he tried to crush me down and throw me while I worked my arms with every ounce of strength, hammering away at his bone-hard body.

Our breath came in hissing gasps; clothing rent in twain, buttons volleyed and our flying feet kicked up dust and dirt. It was a wild minute or two, with my strength rapidly failing, and but for the most timely interference I doubt not but this series of adventures would have terminated then and there. Howbeit, as we fought, red head to red head, we were as suddenly forced rudely apart and a great, deep-throated voice shouted in our ears:

"Mother of God! two men fighting like beasts."

I looked around into the white bearded face of a towering old man in a solemn, long skirted, black coat buttoned close; grey homespun pantaloons, over leather boots, and a high black beaver hat. He was made most conspicuous by a long, priestly beard of white which covered most of his dark and sinister face, very strange to that day and fashion. His white hair hung to his broad shoulders. Behind him stood a drowsy old white nag which had evidently borne him to the fray.

"The Lord has many ways to dispose of life," he quoted.

"This bean't any o' your funeral," cried my opponent

as he wiped a bloody ear on the back of one hairy hand. "You keep out o' this fracas, Elder, er you'll get hurted too."

"No," said I somewhat grimly, "this is my funeral!"

"Desist, ye sinners!" the peacemaker commanded in ministerial tones, standing between us with raised hands, his dark eyes shining with fanatic light. "Repent while there is time. Forgive thine enemies and learn to love."

"Forgive nobody!" growled my opponent.

"Repent nothing!" cried I, sparring for an opening.

"Stop where you are!" commanded the maker of peace and by way of argument he presented a big horse-pistol and cocked it full in our faces. "I will have peace at any cost and if there is to be any fighting in the presence of God I'll do it myself."

My behemoth opponent gazed into the black muzzle of the pistol with wide eyed fear and astonishment. Step by step he backed away, mouth agap, eyes staring, and when he dared risk it he turned and fled for his very life.

"In working for peace," began I, wiping a spot of blood from my cheek, "I note that you use the same stern argument as the late Napoleon—the heaviest artillery."

"And like all arguments for peace it is empty," sighed the priestly one as he dropped the pistol back into its saddle holster. "That murderous weapon hasn't been loaded since the war of 1812 but when I bring it up as a point in argument it remains undisputed."

"Superior weapons are always a strong factor for peace," smiled I, "and it is mighty hard to tell whether a pistol is loaded or not by staring down its muzzle."

"Superior armament is about the only argument for peace men or nation are willing to listen to," he sighed. "But what was this highway battle all about?"

"It started over the rent question," I answered.

"Ah," said he, "the question of rent!"

"The fellow seemed to be most disappointed when I said *Down with the Rent*—"

"So you said *Down with the Rent*?"

"Merely to please him and to avoid trouble, for I would have said *Up With the Rent* quite as willingly, having no preference in the matter."

"Having no preference in the matter," he repeated.

"None at all sir, knowing nothing about the question," said I. "The fight really began over a difference of opinion regarding the respective shades of our red hair."

"Merciful Father! What a day and age when men combat over such a trifle as the shade and tint of hair," he groaned. "'God has cast upon us, even as upon the Egyptians, the fierceness of his anger.'"

"And yet the history of red hair tends to prove that it usually excites trouble and not infrequently leads to blows."

"The war cloud hangs over the hills!" he cried in a strange voice, raising his withered hands and bearded face to the skies. "The taint of battle is in man's blood and there is shooting and killing and suffering and sorrowing without end. Oh, God, punish them! Punish them. Tear this wicked world from the blue firmament and hurl it into hell; destroy it, cleanse it with fire, that so you may prevent all the mischief they otherwise might do."

He shook his white head sadly as though hell-fire was too good for this wicked world and turned to me questioning.

"And now, son of Mars, which way might you be going?"

"I am going towards the village of Esperance, which, I believe, is in the county of Dutchess."

"And what are you going to do there, my truculent friend?"

"I started out to look over some real estate."

"Ah, some real estate!" said he.

"And incidentally to find four lost keyholes."

"Hum," said he. "I've heard of keys being lost, but this is the first time I ever heard of keyholes being mislaid. It was very careless of you, sir."

"Oh, I didn't lose them," I hastened to explain. "They have been lost for years and years."

"That makes the task vastly harder," he agreed, eyeing me very curiously and running his long fingers through his white beard. "Now a keyhole that has been lost for a year or more might easily be blown to God knows where."

"Then there's the more important matter of looking up a prospective wife."

"I wish you luck," said he, "and hope you will find the long-sought perfect woman."

"The woman has been found—that is selected, chosen, or bargained for, but how near perfection she may be, or may not be, I do not know."

"No one ever does—until you marry them."

"And after all it is, ah, more or less a lottery."

"Unless you have known the woman a long time," he agreed.

"Oh, but I don't know her at all!"

"Love at first sight is always dangerous," he warned.

"Nor have I ever seen her."

"You said she had been found—"

"Ah, yes," I explained; "old Zodoc found her for me two days ago. Her name," I pulled out the marriage agreement to make sure, "is Ronella Hartwell of Oakwood Manor."

To my very great surprise the bearded old peacemaker tipped his white head back and burst out in a roar of noisy laughter.

"This," said I with a frown, "is serious business—for me!"

"Well, well!" ejaculated he, "you're a bold and venturesome lad to say the least."

Here he roared even louder than before.

"Be good enough to explain," I demanded, "what there is so funny about my marrying this young lady?"

"Young?" cried he. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"What has the little lady ever done—"

"Little?" roared he. "Ho, ho, ho ho!"

I leaned against a nearby tree for support while he raised a warning forefinger and glared at me through lowered white brows.

"Forbear," said he, in sepulchral tones. "Money and land are not all. Ye seek an ungodly woman, a vixen, a shrew, and amazonic old maid who tyrannizes her entire family. A veritable heathen who gallops over the country on the holy Lord's day, who flaunts the ancient customs, who reads trashy novels instead of the Sacred Word."

"But I am more interested in how she looks," I interrupted.

"Hellish," said he; "she is the personification of sin."

After this last I had some hopes of her, because sin must be attractive, if nothing else.

"Is she then so very old?" I asked anxiously.

"Mellow," as though to break it gently, "not to say ripe. While most maids are married at sixteen, or eighteen at the latest, she has turned full five and twenty."

"A green old age to say the least," I smiled.

"Beware!" he cautioned. "There is danger ahead."

"I hope you are carrying God's message my way," said I, "for, with your horror of fighting and your peace-making pistol, I shall be safe enough."

"I walk in the shadow of the Lord and no man dares to harm Elder Russell, the circuit rider, whose church is the great wilderness of sin, whose pulpit is every green hill and whose congregation is all men who will listen to the Holy Word."

He mounted the old plough horse and rode beside me reading, as we progressed, from a battered and dog-eared Bible which he pulled from his coat pocket; and thus, strangely met, we journeyed on.

The ancient nag plodded steadily, setting no great pace, head hanging low, eyes half closed, legs swinging mechanically as though it had travelled thus for hundreds of years and fully expected to be going that way for ever. The gaunt Circuit Rider sat bolt upright in the saddle, the skirts of his shiny black broadcloth reaching almost to his knees, the black beaver tilted on the back of his head, his booted feet dangling from the stirrups. He read aloud from the Scriptures, his rough voice booming from his great chest and rolling from his white beard in a weird sort of chant. Dark eyes burned with zealous, unearthly fire and his hollow cheeks were flushed with purpose and the fervor of his mission.

"'A time of trouble such as never was since there was a beginning.'"

The Elder reverently closed the worn book and stared afar off into the yellow skies, talking, not so much to me, as to all men.

"I am of God's chosen. He speaks to me with His voice. His message I shout unto deaf ears. His holy words I do repeat to the ungodly. He has called me from

the plough and the field to warn all men that the end of the world is near, to give all sinners a chance to repent and to be saved before the earth falls into the sun where white-hot flames leap mountain high."

He closed the book and announced that he must leave me.

"I'm sorry," said I, "although you've rather knocked all the romance out of my adventure."

"Desist—return to your great city—keep away from this troublesome countryside and that woman of evil—prepare for that greater adventure, so soon to come, beyond this world."

"No, I've rather got to see this through."

"On the first Sunday in November," he cried in warning tones, "this wicked world will come to an end."

"Too late," said I, "to save me!"

"Even at the eleventh hour—"

"Now if you could only make it a couple days sooner."

"Young man," began he very earnestly, "don't jest. The Creightons were always serious men and I knew your grandfather well."

I gazed at him in mild surprise, because I had never seen the man before and had not told him my name.

"I know the Creighton shade of hair," he chuckled as though reading my thoughts.

"It's, it's rather a peculiar red—"

"And the Creighton nose that goes with it," he added.

"I believe I got all the family heirlooms—"

"Your grandfather was my friend in many ways," said he. "I would not see his grandson harmed."

"You've already proven that," said I, remembering the fight in the road. "But I can assure you that I am used to trouble and one not easily harmed."

"You might run foul of Indians," remarked The Elder. Indians! Indians, a few miles out of New York in this civilized day!

Snatching off his black beaver he fumbled around in the lining and produced a bit of blank paper. His waistcoat pocket gave up a pencil and using the crown of his hat for a rest he hurriedly scribbled something on the paper and handed it to me.

"Keep that well hid and if any Indians molest you just show it to their Chief and all will be well."

I reluctantly watched him depart and as soon as he was out of sight I turned the bit of paper over in my hand and read:

"To all warriors of the Great Council:—

The bearer of this is a good Indian journeying in our interests and should be allowed to proceed along the Trail of Peace. Give him of Meat and Drink as the Great Prophet commands.

The Old News Carrier."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A NARROW country road, soft with heavy, wheel-ground yellow-grey dust; flanked by dense thickets of briar and hazel, powdered foliage bent humbly at the feet of flaming sumacs. Fat, grey woodchucks, lazy and drowsy as the long sleep approached, lumbered across the wheel ruts ahead of me. A nervous cotton-tail rabbit hopped along the shallow ditch; now dashing madly away for a yard or two, now immobile beneath a dusty bush to stare at me. Tiny birds of the far northland swept in noisy flight through the tree tops ever southward.

Now and then, as I passed between wide cultivated meadows, farm hands called cheerily from the corn and potato fields. But, as evening approached, travel became less and less on the old Albany turnpike until I had walked a full two miles without meeting so much as a two-wheeled tilbury.

Came I then to an abandoned toll gate, although I did not know it to be abandoned at the time—certainly the “toll keeper” was there in my case!—when a man stepped anxiously out, a large man, as though he might be the toll keeper to intercept me under the impression that to escape his road tax I had secreted horse and gig about my person.

He stood, legs apart, as though the middle of the road were a heaving quarter deck, arms behind him, his heavy face pulled into hard lines, glowering at me as I approached. His second-hand, ill-fitting civilian clothes could not disguise the indelible stamp of the sea marking his every

movement. When I was but a yard away he slowly withdrew a brawny tattooed hand from beneath his coat tails and threatened me with a heavy bludgeon.

"Avast!" cried he, in voice and dialect assumed for the occasion. "Heave to!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" I felt my blood surging as the primal man within rose to the challenge of his belligerent attitude and voice.

"Cast yer mast lights on thet 'er stick!" He fairly rubbed my nose with it.

"A bit of newly cut iron-wood," said I. "What about it?"

"This about it," he scowled. "Mind what I'm a-shoutin' then or ye'll get it over th' figger-head proper."

"I am all a-tremble with eagerness and attention!"

With half an eye I could see that this sea-faring man was not the ruffian he was trying so hard to imitate. He had assumed old clothes and rough ways for an unusually rough piece of business but he was no ordinary highwayman. A desperate man, thought I, new at desperate methods.

"Barent Creighton, I believe," he growled. "Eh-wot?"

"That is my name at present, though I am very like to change it, ah, somewhat hurriedly, after the first of the month—along with my address!"

"Common enough nowadays," gruffly, "sink me if 't aint, an' you can change 'em both as often as you damn well please—after I go through you."

"A bitter disappointment awaits you," I warned.

"Oh, ho!" he garuffed. "I guess your manifest'll show wot I want t' see!"

"So you've come ashore with the Jolly Roger flying?"

"A privateer," he grinned, "with letters o' mark, th'

right t' board an' search—so jest shell out that little old legacy o' yours!"

"Oh," said I. "I'm glad you didn't ask for money, or anything valuable."

"By th' cat-o'-nine to th' devil's course, I may, 'fore I get through!"

"That—ah—little detail has been well attended to very recently."

"No matter! Jest toss overboard that bit o' paper in th' lead tube."

"Can't—positively can't."

"Can't—eh? Well, m' hearty, by th' sampans o' hell, ye better, an' damn quick too!"

The cudgel twirled savagely in his thick fingers.

"Can't!" I repeated, "It's gone."

"Gone!"

"One of your gentry, a little old sea-faring man with a sharp nose, took it last night, but don't get the idea that I feel badly about it—"

"With greyish hair an' a nick in his chin?" he questioned.

"Exactly."

"That'll be th' Captain," talking to himself. "Curse him for a punky piece o' gear!"

Here my highwayman nearly choked with wrath and fell to cursing at a great rate. He was damning Captain somebody to hades and back.

"Well, damnation an' Davy Jones!" he roared. "Fork out them gold gods an' th' keys."

"You're welcome," said I, reaching for the keys. "Glad to get rid of them. But, I warn you, that you're setting quite a stent for yourself—looking up those keyholes."

"Leave that t' me!" he dropped them in his pocket. "I guess I know where they be!"

"Oh, I'm glad somebody knows. It has puzzled the whole family since grandfather died."

"Now th' gold gods!"

My last bit of value, but I handed them over.

"And that little fat god with the grimace is a jinx," I explained.

"A wot?"

"A jinx, an ill omen, a thing of evil, a hoodoo, a god of bad luck."

He crossed himself hurriedly and tossed the grinning idol in the road at my feet. Dropping the rest in his pocket he stepped nearer.

"Come about," he ordered. "Come about!"

"What for?"

"'Cause I mean t' board an' search ye fore an' aft; that's wot fer!"

Assuredly this was no common blue-water salt. I had nothing but my pride to defend so I turned and, holding the club over me, he searched me for the missing parchment. It was then I noticed that his left hand, going in and out my pockets, was without an index finger—but it was not until he had gone that I remembered him as the stranger of the Coffee House who had laughed so heartily over the account of my inheritance in *The Morning Star* and knew for a certainty that his rough sailor ways had been assumed for the occasion.

"You don't want to take on an apprentice, do you?" I asked.

He only glared at me.

"I'm getting a bit tired of always being the robbee. I

think I'd like to learn the business myself. Of course the hours are long and the pay uncertain but—"

He was hurrying on down the road muttering and cursing to himself about the Captain.

When I had come to a little hamlet the barefoot village boys were driving the heavy uddered cows along the dusty road for the evening milking and I made haste to look around for a suitable inn to house me for the night. There was one of pretentious frontage which promised much, *The Wayfarer's Home*, and I decided to seek there my bed and board.

The tap-room announced its location even before I entered, smelling strongly of spilled ale and dead tobacco smoke, for it held a noisy gathering of boisterous men about the benches and tables or leaning against the little bar, each with a glass of ale or cider before him. There was so much noise and confusion that no attention was paid me as I entered and quietly seated myself on a vacant bench near the window, farthest from the bar, laying my staff and hat on the table before me.

Most of the noise was made by a husky, big mouthed, heavy jawed red faced man of huge bulk, dressed in tight fitting mole-skins and heavy boots, who held the centre of the floor. I noted that his right eye was swollen and coloured a beautiful purplish black. He poised a half drained mug of ale in one hand and gesticulated wildly with the other as he explained, in a bellowing voice, the circumstances connected with the ornamented optic.

"...th' first Injun rebel thet jumps me I hits hard—a right t' th' jaw!" He demonstrated this with a pudgy fist. "Jest then I gets a larrup in th' eye. Jest take a look at thet eye! Any other man would a-gone out cold with sich a crack, but with my ee-normous strength an'

wonderful constitootion it hardly staggers me. My dander was up an' I grabs fer a rough an' tumble an' fetches away mask, disguise an' all. That Injun jumps into th' brush like a scared rabbit, feared I might recognize him! I got jest one glimpse, an' damn m' eyes! if thet Anti-rent rebel didn't have th' reddest hair I ever seed 'n this world."

"Hurrah fer Toby!" yelled one of the listeners.

"Good old Toby!"

"I'm rough, I be, an' ready. I'm all wooly from m' eyes down," boasted Toby. "I can guzzle more red licker, fool more wimmen an' cool out more men than any other feller in seven counties."

"You're the shaggy bear o' th' forest, Toby!"

"You're almighty droll, y' be, Toby!"

"Toby Bouck's th' boy!"

"He'll learn th' damned Anti-renters what trees make shingles!"

"I'd jest like t' meet with thet red head in th' daylight," declared Toby. "He'd hardly make bait fer sich a bully's me. I'd take thet red scalp o' his 'n; I'd—"

Being too tired and thirsty to listen further to the braggard I rapped loudly on the walnut table before me to attract the attention of the bar-keep who stood, open mouthed, drinking in every word. Instantly the voices quieted and all eyes were bent on me. There was a nervous shuffling of feet. The intrepid Toby took one look and stepped quickly back, his ale mug shivering on the floor, then all was silent. I did not know that the last red rays of the afternoon sun were shining through the window and striking full upon my auburn head until it glowed like living flame.

I rapped again, with a three cent piece I had found in

the lining of my vest, to show that I was of the flesh, not understanding their frightened attitude at my unexpected presence.

"I would have a glass of new cider," I announced in no gentle voice.

"Th' very feller!" gasped Toby as he turned quickly and dashed for the back door.

"My Gawd, look at that hair!" exclaimed one of the spectators, which angered me not a little.

"If it hurts your eyes I can fix them for you," I replied hotly. "A mug of new cider, Mr. Bar-keep!"

"Just a minute, sir; just a minute," apologized the pasty-faced bartender as with nervous fingers he brought me a mug of the sparkling apple juice.

I noticed with disgust that he kept the table between us and watched me with fear in his eyes. The cool, refreshing drink of effervescent cider, pleasant to the taste, tickling the tongue with a delightful tang, cut the dust in my throat and brought new life into my tired body. When the empty mug rattled down on the table I was surprised to find the room quite vacant, except for myself and the whitefaced attendant.

"Tell me, my friend," said I severely. "Have I suddenly broken out with the small-pox or did your customers fear that I was about to take up a collection for suffering Ohio emigrants that they should flee the spot so hurriedly?"

"It's, it's your hair, sir," he stammered. "Since you axes me, sir. No offence to you, I hope, sir; none at all, sir."

"My hair!" I exclaimed.

"Your hair, sir—that an' Toby Bouck's eye."

"Black eyes seem to be coming into fashion," I declared.

"Two of them have I seen this day. But what has my hair to do with Toby Bouck's decorated eye?"

"No offence, sir; no offence! But Toby said as how he got that ere eye from a fellow with red—with hair much like yours, sir."

"I never saw the bully before," I fairly shouted. "And if I had, I probably would have given him two black eyes instead of one."

"No doubt, sir; no doubt o' it at all, sir," he was very affable. "You're th' very man to do it, says I, an' th' only one I knows of in these here parts as could do it, sir. Ah, you be a man, sir! An' if you gave him one sich eye I don't see any reason on this here airth why you couldn't a gone an' made it two, sir, had you thought Toby'd look better that way, sir."

"But I tell you I never gave him one."

"But he said as how th' man that did it—the only one in three counties as could a did it—had, had, hair, sir—"

"Of course he had hair," said I, "most men have if you catch them young enough."

"But he said as how his hair, sir, was, was slightly reddish."

"The reddest in the world," I corrected.

"So it was, so it was, sir; th' reddest in th' world, Toby said."

"But my hair isn't the reddest in the world," I protested.

"I dare say not, sir," he stammered. "I never saw more 'n a few thousand so my judgment ain't—"

"It may well be that you are looking at your last!" I interrupted. "I am, as you may guess, somewhat touchy about the colour of my hair. Unless you desire to change

the colour of one, or more, of your eyes, you better show me to my room."

"Your room!" he gasped. "You don't mean, sir; oh, my dear sir, you don't mean you're goin' for to stay all night!"

"That is my very serious intention."

"Then alls I got t' say is—"

"Please don't say anything," I begged. "Words waste time and you've been too extravagant as 't is. I want a room, supper and breakfast in exchange for this gold god."

I sat the little Inca devil out on the table before me.

"You can have th' whole house if you want it, sir, but I wouldn't touch that thing for a hundred dollars, no I wouldn't."

"It's harmless enough."

"It's a heathen an' outlandish thing," said he. "I've taken in everything, since I've been in business, from a firestone t' a dimming ring, but this is th' first time I was ever offered a gold image. Now if it's a room you'll be wantin' I'd suggest—"

Though I know now that his inferred warning was kindly meant, as though he didn't want me to die in the house, I was too sullen and angry to listen. Somewhat timidly he guided me up the stairs to a large chamber and waved me inside, too overcome for words. His very gesture implied that he left me there to my fate and his pasty face betokened that he fully expected to help carry me out feet foremost on the morrow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I SAT there on the edge of the bed in the quiet of my room bathing my tired feet in cool water when it suddenly came over me that The Elder had said all the valley towns were Up-renters. This, and the fact that the tavern loafers firmly believed that I was the nocturnal assailant of Toby Bouck, was quite enough to set me thinking of my precarious position. I ceased to smile over the way my red thatch had dispersed the town bully and the barroom touts for, beyond a doubt, Toby Bouck and his "law and order" followers would soon return with reinforcements to arrest me for a rebellious tenant and, mayhap, to seek revenge for a decorated eye for which I was in no way responsible. It was a strange twist of fate that I, coming to collect my back rents, and Up-renter if ever there was one, should be mistaken for an Anti-rent rebel. It was also evident that it was quite impossible for me to establish my identity on a moment's notice. Much might happen before I could communicate with my friends and I had not so much as an old letter on my person to tell who I was.

More bold than discreet, I finally picked up my hat and staff and descended to the dining room, determined to eat and leave the place as soon as possible. As it was early I found the dining room quite empty. The snow white table, lighted with a single sperm oil lamp, was already burdened with good things to eat. A fine, well built young woman, whose cheeks were very red and whose

eyes were very blue, came from the kitchen to administer to my wants.

"A fine evening—" I began, but she silenced me with a warning finger on her cherry lips.

"Are you tempting me—"

"You do not understand your danger," she cautioned in a low voice.

"Oh, but I do," I protested. "I am in danger of starving this very minute."

"No, no, not that—"

"And I am always in danger of some petty indiscretion whenever I am alone with a pretty maid."

"You will be arrested!" she warned.

"Since when did stealing a kiss become a crime?"

And then and there I braved the dungeon keep.

"They have discovered that you are an Anti-renter," blushing prettily.

"More imagination than discovery."

"But, don't you see, sir? They think you are still in your room and they mean to arrest you when you come down stairs."

"They are too late," I smiled, "for I am already down."

"They, they mean to beat you—"

"And if they try it I shall present Mr. Toby Bouck with a mate to that funeral eye of his."

When she saw that I was determined to remain until I had eaten she made haste to help me with the food, keeping an apprehensive eye upon the various doorways lest they burst open and emit a crowd of bloodthirsty ruffians. In truth, I thought at the time that, woman-like, she was magnifying trouble and that I was not in any such danger as she intimated.

When I felt that I could hold no more, though my ap-

petite seemed as eager as ever, I pushed back from the table with a sigh of regret. I could hear the hum of many voices in the other part of the house and this was enough to warn me to be on my way, as it was evident that I was alone in the enemy's country and, though innocent enough, there was no telling in those mad days what might happen. The Anti-renters had been up to much mischief among the county officials and the Up-renters were hot after revenge. Toby Bouck's word would be sufficient to identify me for the time being and that was long enough for them to accomplish much evil.

"You must go out the back way," cautioned the maid. "Through the kitchen. Hurry! Once outside cut across the garden and into the pasture, run straight across the hill and you will find the upper road."

Thanking her for her kindly warning and assistance I dropped a seal from my watch fob on the table to pay for my meal and stepped into the kitchen. Behind me I could hear the slamming of doors and the angry pitch of voices. Evidently I had walked away in the very nick of time for the noise indicated that my vacant room had been discovered. I opened the kitchen door and slipped out into the soft twilight—straight into the arms of a burly young man who was evidently guarding that exit.

"Ha, my fine fellow!" he cried, presenting a musket to my head. "I've got you now."

Owing to the gathering darkness he had not discerned my staff and with it I quickly knocked aside his weapon which exploded harmlessly in the air, emitting a stream of flame and a shower of sparks. Straightway I fetched him a crack under his left eye which laid him on his back in the wood-pile.

The musket shot was signal enough that I was trying

to escape by the back way and men came running from all directions. I did not tarry to see how many, but vaulted the garden fence and sprinted away across the pasture just as they began to shout after me.

"There he goes!"

"Halt!"

"Catch th' rebel!"

"Don't let him get away!"

"Catch the scoundrel!"


"Stop him!"

"Shoot him!"

Crack! Crack! went the pistols and the bullets whistled all about me or thud, thudded into the soft sod. But I was making good time, and it was quite dark, so at that distance they could see but a rapidly vanishing shadow and, happily, none of the flying lead touched me. I remember that as I ran, with the bullets whistling, I suffered from no sense of fear, rather rejoicing in my escape and smiling to think that I had left behind another black eye to add to the number already at large.

Of course they gave chase, but my legs were long and I had a good start. Instinct seemed to guide my flying feet over that strange, stumpy pasture so I met with no mishap. I scrambled over a rail fence and came out into the upper road, as the maid had directed, and raced on.

All too soon I began to realize that I had travelled a good many miles that day, for one unused to much walking, and that I had eaten a very hearty supper. Presently I could hear feet pounding the roadbed no great distance behind me. I sprinted on, hoping for a likely place to throw them off the scent, and my heart was near to bursting when I made a piece of wood and dashed into the shelter of the timber.



The proverbial needle in the haystack would have been easier to find so I gave myself no concern over the present. In all probability they would ⁴parole and guard this upper road all night, leaving the lower thoroughfare quite at my disposal, providing I could find it. So, when I was quite rested, I stole quietly to the edge of the wood and made my way back to the lower road beyond the village.

For the first mile I proceeded with great caution, holding tight to my poised staff, fearing that they might anticipate my strategy and throw a guard across this road also but, as nothing happened to confirm this suspicion, I increased my pace and began to think of other things, wondering where I would find a place to lay my head for the night or whether I would be forced to sleep beneath the trees.

The danger now left far behind I struck up a smart pace, keeping my anxious eyes open for twinkling tavern lights ahead. I was passing through another piece of wood, where the giant trees arched over the highway, without a thought of danger, when a tall, shadowy figure stepped out of the darkness and presented a pistol to my head.

"Halt!" commanded he.

I could not discern his features nor guess at his intent but I obeyed, after a fashion. That is, I halted, but only for an instant, then I lunged forward with my staff. I felt the end plunge into something soft and yielding, there came a hissing gasp and my highwayman doubled up instantly and sank down into the road without a word.

I had no time to take advantage of this temporary victory, for the very next second I was pounced upon by a number of men and thrown violently to the ground where, in spite of all I could do, I was quickly bound hand and

foot and a heavy potato sack was drawn tightly over my head.

The first thing I heard was the gasping, choking voice of the man whose middle I had sounded with my staff.

"Oh . . . just . . . wait. Oh! Lord. . . I can't . . . breathe."

"Up with him boys," called a gruff voice.

"Come on there."

"Hurry up."

"Wait . . . I . . . can't . . . breathe . . . I . . ."

"Shut up!" hissed some one. "Want him to recognize ye, Ike Hicks? Ye'll feel better when you get over it."

In a trice I was raised to the shoulders of four men and was being hurried away through the wood. I felt the branches of trees swishing over my body and heard the crash and crunch of leaves underfoot. I was not hurt, so I rested as quietly and as comfortably as possible under the circumstances, awaiting developments and wondering what Toby Bouck and his ruffians meant to do with me.

After a time we descended into a little hollow where the cavalcade halted and I was thrown none too gently on the ground. I heard the snip, snip of steel striking flint and soon saw the flicker of fire through the loosely woven tow-cloth bag.

"All ready," announced the same gruff voice of the leader.

I was rudely jerked to a sitting position and after a fumble with the cords the bag was snatched away.

"Oh, gosh!" ejaculated the strange figure which had pulled off the bag. "Hell an' twelve!"

"This ain't Toby Bouck!" exclaimed another.

"Not with *that* hair."

I winked a moment in the bright light of flaming birch

bark, unable to believe my eyes. Had I been suddenly taken by Beelzebub and his imps, each with horns, hoofs and wings, I could have been no less astounded. Grouped about me in various attitudes of surprise were some twenty or more strange goblins of the night in semi-human form. They were dressed, for the most part, in long flowing robes of figured calico in violent blues and reds, each with a hideous mask of painted sheep skin and a strange headdress of turkey feathers. A number of them wore brass ear-rings and flowing wigs of coarse black hair. They seemed of the earth, yet not of the earth, savages and yet not savage. Behind them burned a bright fire and over it, on a tripod, hung a black kettle which gave off a dense vapour smelling strongly of tar. Several bulging, pillowy bags, from which protruded feathers, lay carelessly about and one of the barbarians brandished an old whitewash brush.

"Who in thunder be you?" demanded the leader of the strange band.

"Fear not," I answered, "I am of the earth, most gracious Martans. But how I got to this strange planet will ever remain a mystery."

"Don't try t' be funny," he warned. "This's serious business."

"You'd never suspect it from the looks," said I.

"What are you doing here?"

"I am in search of four lost keyholes," I repeated.

"He's a fool," cried one.

"A bit daffy."

"And what have you got to say about the rent?"

It dawned upon me that I was a prisoner of the Anti-rent "Indians" and had evidently been mistaken in the darkness for Toby Bouck.

"In the presence of so many 'warriors,' " began I, "it

would be foolish to say anything but *down* with the rent."

"Ah, don't want to commit yourself, eh?" sneered the Chief. "Maybe you're carrying a few writs of ejectment or warrants on your person. Search him, warriors."

I was quickly and thoroughly searched. They soon brought to light the bit of folded paper in my tobacco pouch.

"Ah," cried one of the searchers, "bring a light."

Another "warrior" brought a burning brand and they read The Elder's pass.

"It's in Th' Elder's fist all right enough, boys," declared the Chief. "I don't know as we want to molest this fellow, who seems innocent enough, though somewhat gone in his head. What Th' Elder says goes, so let him up."

The ropes were quickly untied and I was assisted to my feet.

"Sorry we jumped you," apologized the leader. "But we were expectin' Toby Bouck about that time and it's so infernally dark we're just naturally bound to make a mistake now and then."

"No harm done," said I. "And if you're looking for Toby Bouck and his men you will certainly find them about a mile or two back on the upper road searching for me."

Then I must tell them briefly of my adventures of the evening.

"You'll find a good tavern a mile beyond," advised the Chief as they began to gather up ropes, bags and tarry pot. "Goodnight."

"And I'll show you th' way back to the road," volunteered one of the grotesque figures, "even if you did nigh punch my innards out."

"Sorry," laughed I, "but, you see, I mistook you for Toby Bouck."

“Both lookin’ for the same skunk,” he laughed; “well, I guess neither one o’ us is much the worse for it now that I can breathe. Here’s your road.”

And with that he left me.

a country hotel; money is getting scarcer than hen's teeth and the landed aristocracy is a thing of evil and abomination. May I be boiled if it isn't true, sir. If you want to get along in the world you must be illiterate, learn to eat everything fried, go into politics, steal a farm and get elected to the state legislature."

Perforce I agreed with him, especially about the scarcity of ready money, having not a penny.

"Land tenants would rather stick up a coach at night than do honest work by day," vouchsafed he. "Farmers are raising hell instead of wheat, milking landlords instead of cows, prowling around in calico and turkey feathers, tooting horns and drinking hard cider, waiting for the politicians to steal them a farm, instead of going west where the land is free."

And as he grew more enthusiastic over his subject he began to punctuate his remarks with the thunderous crash of his heavy hand on the table.

"There's neither law nor order in the State!"

Bang! Bang!

"Snatch me bald if there is. A few clodhoppers with tar brushes defying the State militia!"

Bang! Bang! "Rebels running riot." Bang-bang! "The devil t' do every night." Bang-bang! "Murder and rapine and sudden death!" Bang-bang! "Rack me if it isn't hell, sir!"

And thus he roared and banged his way through the heavy meal and the entire history of the Anti-rent rebellion from the time old Hendrick Hudson stumbled upon the great river that bears his name to the tar and feathering of Toby Bouck scarce half an hour before.

"As for me," cried he, dabbing the butter thick on his bread. "I'll sell 'em their farms and be damned to 'em."

Yes sir, they can have 'em and welcome—draw and quarter me if they can't—for what the land is worth and not a damn cent less! If they want free land, let 'em go west and take it where they will get their belly-full of Indians mighty quick. Get a damn good dose of their own medicine!"

I nodded in accord, my very silence urging him on.

"Now there is my lord of Oakwood, as good a fellow as ever stepped in shoe leather, but as greedy as the devil for pious souls that he may acquire more land when what he's got is both a bother and a curse to him. Why, sir, d'y know, I believe William Henry Hartwell would sell his very daughter for a few more acres of land!"

My knife and fork clattered to my plate.

"Why, as to that," I stammered, "I believe he would."

"Dogs bite me if he wouldn't!" thumping the table. "Sell her body and soul for a thousand acres."

"Hardly as cheap as that, "I managed to say. "The price, I believe, is, is—five thousand acres!"

"Land and horses are first to William; family and money last," he affirmed. "I believe that if his favourite breeding stallion and his only daughter were both sick at the same time he'd send for the veterinary first!"

"This daughter now," I began in fear and trembling, "is she really worth five thousand acres?"

"If friend William would sell her for one acre I wouldn't give a rood—"

But he stopped suddenly at sight of my frowning face.

"I beg your pardon," bowed he. "I didn't know that you knew her."

"I don't," I confessed.

"You're lucky," said he. "Spit me if you ain't!"

"Lucky?"

"Indeed! Lucky as a hunchbacked gambler," he affirmed.

"I don't believe that I am," I confessed. "Because you see, I'm going to marry her."

"God—amighty!" he cried. "Going to marry her!"

My lord choked, gasped and sputtered, turned purple in the face and drained his goblet of brandy as though it had been so much light wine.

"Marry, marry her!"

"Why not?"

"But you said you didn't know her."

"Nor have I ever seen her in my life."

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "That probably explains it. I admire your courage!"

"The method isn't altogether new," said I. "I remember my grandfather saying that in China the husband never sees his wife until the wedding day."

"But, my dear sir, this isn't China!"

"There is marrying and giving in marriage."

"Perhaps it's the best way," he sighed. "Now my wife—"

"What is the best way?"

"Why, to marry 'em without seeing 'em."

"Perhaps it is," I nodded. "Certainly adds an element of surprise and uncertainty to the adventure—"

"Curse me, yes! I should say it did!"

"But does not necessarily materially increase the chances a man takes when he gets married."

"No," he admitted. "It doesn't. But, but—damn me up and down, sir!" he roared with laughter, "if you ain't going about it right!"

"Is she as homely as all that?" I cried.

"Oh, dear me, no!" he cried. "It isn't so much her

looks—only, only she is a bit,” I could see he was trying to spare my feelings, “what you might call lively.”

“Lively?”

“And tomboyish—”

“Tomboyish?”

“A regular rowdy!”

“I like some signs and evidence of life in my women.”

“And immodest.”

“Well,” I admitted. “I want them human. But what do you mean immodest?”

“Why, the last time I see her she was riding straddle!”

“The little devil!” said I.

“Galloping down the King’s highway straddle a blooded mare on a Sunday morning.”

“Horrible!”

“And her father raving mad.”

“No doubt he would rather see her in stays and mits attending meeting.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that, sir, it was all because of the blood mare, she being with colt at the time.”

Whereupon I laughed heartily knowing not whether to be sorry or glad of my bargain.

“But, but, don’t misunderstand me,” he hastened to explain. “She’s got a way with her—”

“Her own way, probably!”

“And a figure—”

“Five thousand acres!”

He rolled his eyes upward and sighed mightily.

“There was a time—a couple of years ago—” he sighed amain. “But, then, William really can’t manage her, he, only thinks he can.”

“Does pretty much as she pleases?”

“Scratch me raw if she doesn’t!”

"I hope," rising from the table, "that it will please her to marry me. Goodnight."

His second bottle of wine had come and he begged me share it but I explained that I was too tired and sleepy and must be on my way early in the morning.

"And if you're travelling by diligence—"

"Most diligently," I assured him.

"—I will be pleased to share my coach on the morrow," he finished.

CHAPTER TEN

THE Honourable Sylvester Attleton Cogglesbury, of Bukendaal, certainly travelled in good style as befitted his station in life. A great yellow coach, with red running gear, hauled by a handsome pair of powerful, broad backed greys in silver trimmed leathers, and a liveried negro in the driver's box awaited our pleasure in front of the *Blue Goose* at a not too early hour. Another gold seal settled my tavern bill and this "lift" toward my destination was most welcome.

I found that the honourable Mr. Cogglesbury had added another companion during the night in no less a personage than a Deacon Commings, on some pious business of the church up river.

By no stretch of the imagination could Deacon Commings be called a communicative and entertaining companion. He was young, with that seriousness begot by early piety which makes a man prematurely old in everything but years. His shiny black hair was neatly combed and carefully oiled and each and every black side-whisker lay precisely just so along his ivory pale, hollow cheeks. His close-fitting funeral clothing showed scarce a wrinkle and not a speck of dust or dirt. He sat bolt upright on the edge of the seat, his neatly gloved hands in his lap. Straight across was the Honourable, imperilled by the Deacon's sharp knees, leaning over as he rode and expressing in a loud and throaty voice a voluminous opinion on certain realty matters pertaining to the collection of rents,

emphasizing his points with sundry slaps of his pudgy hand on the Deacon's sharp knee. Now and then Deacon Comings smiled, a faint, sickly, colourless smile as devoid of warmth and mirth as a crevice in a snow bank.

We rolled along smoothly enough while I lolled far down in the seat, listening to the everlasting roar of the Manor Lord's rasping voice and watching the ghostly smile come and go from the Deacon's pious face.

"Just at the foot of this little hill," began the Honourable Lord of Bukendaal, "is the very place where Deputy Sheriff Toby Bouck was held up, tarred and feathered early last night by the Anti-renters."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Deacon with a nervous start. "Oh, bless my soul!"

So that the good Deacon might enjoy his ride I added:

"Anti-rent 'Indians' have been dreadfully thick along the Post Road all summer. Robberies are common enough and murders not infrequent."

"Oh, no! that can't be true!" cried he. "Young man, it is very sinful to jest."

"True as gospel!" answered Mr. Cogglesbury in a hollow voice, swallowing hard. "Dig me raw, if it isn't! They've been robbing and slitting throats here-about all summer—I read it in the papers!"

"Something ought to be done," affirmed the Deacon stiffly, "when honest and respectable folk cannot travel in safety."

"Huh!" snorted Mr. Cogglesbury in disgust. "Travelers better be taking care of themselves, and not expect the State to patrol the highways. Taxes are high enough as 't is. Bullets are the only remedy for such rascals, bullets and plenty of 'em—that's the ticket!"

And to my very great surprise, grunting and puffing with

the exertion, he reached down under the seat and drew forth a bright red carpet bag, from the capacious depths of which he produced two of the ugliest looking pistols it ever fell to my lot to see and they were loaded and primed for business, too.

"Bullets and more bullets," roared he with a grin. "Just let an Anti-renter stick up my coach! Just let 'em sing out, '*Down with the rent*' and I will down a brace of 'em with the finest pair of lead bullets ever run out of a mould!"

The way he flourished the heavy pistols evidenced that the man meant business, too.

"Be careful," I warned.

"Suppose we're stuck up and robbed, eh?"

"It wouldn't be anything new or novel," I answered with a wan smile.

"How about your life, eh?" he choked. "How about your life, sir?"

"Depreciated considerably in value during the past few weeks and still going down."

"Tut! tut! That is sinful," warned the good Deacon.

"Sinful!" echoed Mr. Cogglesbury, "I should say so—positively wicked!" Then to the Deacon. "Did you bring any weapons?"

"Certainly," answered the Deacon. "Weapons—yes, to be sure."

Unwrapping a carefully tied paper bundle, the good Deacon Commings displayed the father of all horse-pistols with a barrel half as long as his forearm and a bore as big as my thumb. "Captain Hicks, who belongs to our Bible class, loaned this to me. He has charged it himself—two drams of powder, I think he said, and seven buckshot. I shall certainly protect myself at all hazards."

As the day waned traffic along the Post Road grew less and less until, for a mile or so, we had passed neither man nor beast. The coach rolled along at a smart pace, the heavy wheels rattling over the stones and crunching through the fallen leaves. The Honourable Sylvester was hushed for a wonder and nodded over his pudgy fists which rested on the top of a gold headed cane. The good Deacon sat with folded arms, rolling his eyes towards the top of the coach and thinking, I make no doubt, of pious things.

We were travelling through the soft dusk of evening beneath the arched trees of a great wood when the coach stopped abruptly, nearly spilling us on the floor.

"Whoa dar! Whoa dar! Bell—Susan!" cried the driver at his prancing horses. "Whoa dar!"

In the centre of the dusky road ahead, barring the way of the coach, I beheld a strange, uncouth creature in female form, leaning heavily on a rude staff and staring at us with glittering, evil eyes. She was old and bent, clad in coarse brown rags, her white hair in locks and tags framing her gaunt face. So eerie was she that the very horses refused to pass her. Uncanny and unearthly, an apparition of the night, the horses shied and backed away from her, snorting and clamping and stamping in terror.

For several minutes she stood there, her flashing eyes searching the coach as though for signs of recognition, seeming to look right through the panels into our very hearts.

"Who is the old beldame and what does she want?" asked Mr. Cogglesbury hoarsely, aroused from his nap.

"It's the Silent Woman," said the Deacon in a frightened whisper. "Hush, she will go in a minute!"

Even as he spoke she turned swiftly and vanished into

the wood like some goblin of the dark. The coach rolled on and Mr. Cogglesbury nodded back into dreamland. The good Deacon, despite his faith, was very much perturbed.

"It's a sign of bad luck," he sighed.

"In that case," said I, "it's a relief to know that my luck could be no worse."

"Last night a screech-owl sat on my window ledge, this morning I spilled the salt," he confided. "And now She comes."

"Why don't you go back and start over again?" I suggested.

"Alas," he sighed, "I cannot. I am going to my wedding."

"Heigho!" I cried, "so am I."

"Congratulations," he smiled.

"Same to you, sir."

"I hope the maid meets all expectations as a wife."

"Oh, well, I don't expect so much. The type of woman—that I am—ah—journeying to see," I explained. "So far as I hear—or manage to learn—I fancy would not appeal to a, ah, churchly man like you."

"I dare say not," he smiled faintly, as though he felt sorry for me.

"She being rather tomboyish—"

"Mercy sakes alive!"

"Lively and boisterous."

"Deary me!"

"And, and immodest."

"The wicked hussy!"

"Though I understand she has considerable property," I added.

"Of course, that makes a material difference," he agreed. "A very great difference."

"I should say it did!" I agreed.

"And as you say,—ah—er—quite naturally, the young lady I am journeying to see is hardly of that—er—type."

"I dare say not!"

"Being sedate and modest, mild and meek, an ardent worker in the church and well skilled in the culinary arts."

"A veritable treasure!"

"Not without some little means." This very proudly.
"And beautiful."

"I congratulate you."

"Thanks," said he. "I hope you are as well pleased with your choice."

"I'll have to be," I sighed. "But I'll—ah—know more about it—ah—after I see her."

"Oh, yes, yes; quite naturally—doubtless it is all right—but—but—who—where—how? My gracious, you don't mean to say you've never seen her?"

"Never."

"Marry a woman you've never even seen!"

"The best authorities agree that you never know a woman until you've married her, so why not?"

"But, but—it isn't done."

"It will be!" I answered. "If ever I arrive at Oakwood Manor."

The good Deacon gasped, strangled—choked.

"Young man!" he cried, fairly jumping from his seat.
"God have mercy on your soul!"

"Now—what the devil—" I cried, beginning to take offence. "This woman, that I am about to wed—"

"Be forewarned—go back!" he cried. "I cannot believe you love such a wild and flippant woman as that."

"I don't, but—"

"An indecorous, rude and wicked woman."

"You are making serious charges—"

"Don't I know!" he cried. "Didn't I call upon her, the vixen, all last winter, with the very best intentions? But, oh, the scorn and ridicule she heaped upon me! The tricks she played upon me—her unholy and ungodly laughter still rings in my ears! Why, why, sir she put a snake—a cold and ugly snake!—in my bed."

"She did!" I laughed.

"Yes, she did," he affirmed. "She set a tub of water where I fell over it."

"She did!" I garuffed anew.

"Yes, sir, she did," he nodded. "Left chestnut burrs in my chair, filled the salt dishes with sugar and the sugar with salt, and a hundred other silly things which finally discouraged my adoration and affection."

He shook his head in sorrow at the memory, made as though to warn me further, but thought better of it and clenched his thin lips the tighter. Thus we rode on in silence.

Night came creeping down from the rolling hills—October night, all fire and golden glow, silent and sombre, hushing the noisy day to rest, bringing in its shadowy wake a soft, velvety curtain of dusky purple which fast deepened into light-spangled black. For a little while the bright stars twinkled merrily, as though flashing friendly signals back and forth, and the world lay in blurred shadowy outline in the darkness beneath. Then a great yellow harvest moon, like a golden coin before the eyes, shouldered above the eastern hills and mounted the sky, flooding down to earth a glowing, radiant light of dainty sheen and softest texture before which the timid shadows ran to hide beneath the trees. Ghostly bats swooped about the swaying coach, darting swiftly in pursuit of the few insects which braved

the autumnal chill in the crisp night air. Phantom rabbits hopped along the road, and shadowy owls fluttered on silent wings over the brush-grown pastures watching for venturesome mice.

It was a night well set for strange events, a night of brilliant moonbeams and thickening shadows, of spiral whiffs of dewy vapour curling up from the sparkling, dew-drenched meadows and streaming from the surface of the placid river. A night when ghostly owls cried their woes, when drowsy birds twittered in their sleep. Ah, such a harvest night as invited ghosts and goblins, imps and demons, pixies and fairies, to be abroad for their pranks—and, withal, it was just such a night as folks would choose for evil work and secret things!

It might possibly have been close to eight o'clock, and near the end of our day's journey, when I heard the sharp rattle of wheels behind us, the sound of galloping horses, and the next instant a profane driver was crowding close behind, yelling loudly for the right of way his haste demanded.

"Half th' road! Half th' road there!" he called from the darkness behind us. "Half th' road there, you black-faced monkey with the hearse."

"Take care dar, you bull-whackin' hayseed!" shouted our negro, giving the fellow as good as he sent by way of hard language, as we swung to the side of the road and the swaying coach dashed past, scraping our hubs. Before we could even guess what it was all about the vehicle had rolled out of sight, rumbling and swaying over the brow of the hill.

"The Albany Post," mumbled Mr. Cogglesbury, coming out of his doze for a second.

"Some mad revellers out for a night of sin, dissipation and iniquity," affirmed the Deacon.

"Devil take them," sighed The Honourable sleepily.

"Most like he will," nodded the Deacon, in a tone of voice which implied that he was glad of it.

The noise of the brake grinding against the wheels drowned all further attempt at conversation, for we were dropping down a steep hill.

Just as I was congratulating myself that all danger of meeting Anti-renters was over the night echoed with a wild yell and from a little distance ahead came the sharp report of a pistol.

"Hark!" cried Mr. Cogglesbury, straightening up with a jerk. "What was that?"

"Mercy sakes alive!" gasped the Deacon.

I thrust my head out of the window to investigate and instantly my ears were assaulted with a rattling chorus of firearms.

Bang! Bang! Bangggggg!

"Anti-renters!" shrieked the Honourable Lord of Buckendaal. "My pistols!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A FULL quarter of a mile ahead, in a piece of wood, the lurid flash-flash of pistols rent the semi-darkness of the tree-enshadowed highway and by this feeble light I discerned a number of quaintly disguised phantom riders galloping wildly about a stalled coach. With the echoing pistol shots in their nervous ears our big greys leaped in the harness and raced to the fray like trained chargers, dragging the swaying, bounding coach after them at terrific speed, the aged negro driver too paralysed with fright to stop their mad run.

I was clinging desperately to the window in order to see what was going on when there came a deafening explosion, the roar as of a siege gun within the narrow confines of the coach and the Deacon came staggering back into my arms screaming that he had been fatally shot, although it was nothing more serious than the heavy recoil of the huge pistol which he had unlimbered and fired out of the coach window, the barrel flying up and striking him on the forehead. The swaying vehicle was instantly filled with dense powder smoke as, choking with the acrid fumes, I eased the weak and fainting Deacon to the floor between the seats.

Bang! Bang!

Two lightning like flashes at the other window and the Honourable Cogglesbury had emptied both pistols into the nearby woods and slipped down between me and the seat, grovelling for more room among the carpet-bags and lug-

gage, begging in a hoarse voice to be spared his life and purse.

Even at our mad speed we were not yet within pistol shot of the coach which blocked the highway ahead, for all this had taken but a second or two, but the negro driver, too scared to take any note of distance, which in the moonlight is always deceptive, left the galloping horses to their fate and turned loose with a sawed-off double barrelled shotgun, firing both charges at the distant Pleiades. The report was like a salvo from a man-o'-war, frightening the horses into greater speed, and, as the coach rolled through the dense smoke cloud, I managed to stick my head out of the lurching window to yell madly for him to stop the horses before we were all killed.

And thus, yelling and shooting and galloping and careening like mad through the yellow moonlight, we bore down upon the Anti-renters and the stalled coach ahead. Our hasty and reckless arrival looked, and sounded, more like a daring rescue, a coach filled with armed and determined men, than a very angry and, I fear, profane young man doing his level best to preserve his life and limbs so that he could be quietly held up and decently robbed of what little he had left. Evidently the Anti-renters thought a rescue at hand for, with the thunder of our guns in their ears and the mad coach bearing down upon them, they stayed not upon the order of their going but wheeled their horses and, like ghostly phantoms of the night, raced away to be instantly swallowed up by the black shadows of the wood.

The big greys, very fortunately, decided not to attempt a hurdle of the stalled coach and, inasmuch, as they could not go around, they came, perforce, to a complete stop, blowing hard as though they had thoroughly enjoyed the

run and considered it the most thrilling excitement.

The coach ahead was dark and quiet and there was no one on the box. The horses were cropping the nearby foliage. As I looked closer, in the pale moonlight, I saw that the vehicle was almost identically like our own, even to the color and finish, and that the big greys standing in the ditch and nibbling at the ripe leaves were almost exact counterparts of those which had hauled us thither. I began to wonder if the Anti-renters hadn't intended to entertain the Honourable C. and myself! Puzzling at what had become of the occupants, I stepped closer and then it was I heard a woman's voice, firm and unafraid, from the darkened interior.

"Well, Mr. Galloping Dick Turpin, and what next?"

For a second I was startled and knew not what to say, having had but little experience at rescuing females in distress and those far from being strangers on a lonesome road at night. Then, gathering courage for the worst, I stepped boldly up and looked into the open window of the dark coach, seeing nothing.

"Hello!" I called. "Come out."

A carefully gloved hand came out of the darkness and smacked me across the left cheek in no gentle way! It was a large, heavy hand, evidently firmly affixed to a strong, well muscled arm. My head fairly rocked!

"Don't try to frighten me!" the voice cried.

I sprang back in time to escape a second blow.

"Loafers and rebels in disguise—"

"Madam," I began hastily.

"Scoundrels and ruffians—"

"Madam!"

"Things have come to a pretty pass when defenceless women can not ride the Post Road at night!"

"Madam—dear madam," I began. "Can't you understand—I'm not an Anti-renter!"

"Oh, you are not?"

"Positively, emphatically not!"

"Oh, a regular highwayman?"

"Nothing of the kind—I'm the—the Rescuing Knight." At this she laughed until I wished to strangle her.

"It's funny, isn't it?"

"Ridiculous!" she answered in a choked voice. "The funniest ever!"

"I hope you are enjoying this farce, Madam."

"Immensely!" she snickered. "Oh, an amateur Robin Hood!"

"Rescuing pugilistic damsels in distress is not my mission in life."

"An ill paid one at best," said she. "I believe I struck you."

"Oh, was it you?" sarcastically. "I thought the off-horse had kicked me."

"I'm sorry," said she, "but I have such a terrible temper when aroused."

"It certainly was not my intention to arouse you."

"Oh, it wasn't that—I just had such a horrid quarrel with father."

"Your father is a brave man."

"With such a beastly temper!" she sighed. "Oh, such an ungovernable and uncontrollable temper. Why, he actually struck me with his riding whip!"

"Ah," said I, rubbing my cheek, "then you come by it honestly! I envy his prerogative."

"I have run away from home!" she answered in a firm, determined tone. "I will not live with the brute another day—another hour!"

"Well, you can run back, can't you?" I suggested.

"I left him raging and roaring. Struck me, his only daughter, with a whip—"

"I know exactly how it felt," said I, hand to face.

"But I paid him well for it! I'll bet his head aches yet with the weight of '*The Justification of Faith*.'"

"No doubt of it," said I. "'T is a heavy book."

"He, he is furious!"

"He will get over it."

"He will never forgive me."

"But they always do, it is quite the custom."

"But I don't want him to!"

"You will in the morning."

Even as the words fell from my lips over the top of the long hill behind us came a thunder of hoofs and the rumble of hurrying wheels. Flying shoes were striking fire from the stones in the roadbed as the vehicle tore down upon us.

"Hark!" cried the voice. "It is my father in pursuit. Good Sir, you must save me!"

"Save you—again!"

"You must not let him find me here."

"As well here as any place."

"I shall run into the woods."

"You wouldn't go far—it is too dark."

"Quick, you must help me!" she implored.

"But really, madam, I can't."

"You must—for your own sake."

"For my sake?" I could not understand. "What do you mean?"

"Hurry—my father is raving mad. You would not have time to explain. I told him, just to plague and provoke him, that I was going to run away with, with—a cer-

tain church deacon—a man he hates—abominates—and in the darkness he would probably kill you at sight!”

Indeed, I was in a most serious predicament with an irate father bearing swiftly down upon me, armed to the teeth, no doubt, and in a proper mood to pistol a man first and explain afterwards. I needed time to think! Running quickly back to the Cogglesbury coach where it stood beside the road I jumped on the box and fairly kicked the old negro into the driver's seat and flung him the reins.

“Drive like the devil!” I commanded as I sprang to the ground and slammed the door.

As the coach leaped ahead under the eager whip of the driver I ran back to the girl's abandoned vehicle and, seizing whip and rein, pulled to one side so that the other coach could pass. There was a wood-road close by and, as quickly as possible, I took advantage of the heavy shadows beneath the trees and wheeled into the woods, stopping as soon as we were out of sight from the highway.

Far ahead I could hear the rumble of the Cogglesbury coach and the cries of the negro driver, in a panic of fear, as he urged the horses into greater speed. Then the pursuing coach dashed by and I caught a hurried glimpse of a man's close cropped head hanging out of the open window and heard him shouting in a very profane manner:

“Lay on the leather, Black Dan,” he roared. “Lay on the leather! Catch that runaway or leave the nags dead in the highway, you hear me, you black rascal! Lay on the leather—lay it on! Oh, if ever I get my two hands on her—”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THERE in the cool, still depths of the forest where some woodchopper had cleared a little space, mayhap to cord his tan bark or steamboat fuel, I walked the big greys about in a short circle and brought the coach to a stop, at loss just what to do next.

The stars paled to insignificance before the majesty of the moon. About me the great wood was hushed by my sudden invasion, for the wood creatures knew just as well as I that no coach and pair had any legitimate business in the old woodroad at that hour of the evening. No pink-footed deer-mice scurried over the dry leaves, no tawny, large-eyed flying squirrels volleyed from tree trunk to tree trunk, no shadowy, inquisitive rabbits hopped across the open—even the crickets were still. The yellow moonlight sifted down through the scrawny branches of gnarled old maples and twisted oaks, sparkling like jewels on the long wet blades of the wild grass that carpeted the little open space. A most fitting place, thought I, for forest nymphs and wood pixies to hold their harvest festival—and then I bethought me of the unseen woman passenger in the coach whom I had saved from the Anti-rent “Indians” and an irate father. I leaned over the box and listened attentively but all was silent within the vehicle.

I jumped off and threw open the coach door.

“My dear lady,” I addressed her politely, conjuring up in my brain the termagant suggested by the incident. “What are your orders?”

"Oh, sir," came the voice, now completely changed and modified, rich and full in tone. "I do not know, sir."

"Surely you must do something," I suggested.

"But whatever shall we do?" asked the mysterious voice in a puzzled tone.

"We!" I exclaimed.

"Whatever are *you* going to do?" she corrected.

"Whatever you say," I answered most gallantly.

"I—I have nothing to say," she owned frankly. "And I have said it."

"Then I would suggest again that you return home," I ventured.

"Oh, no!" she protested. "I cannot go home!"

"But you must," I insisted.

"Must?" she questioned with a dangerous note, a rising inflection in her voice. "Must?"

"Should," I modified the sentence, remembering my aching jaw. "Should!"

"Ah," sighed she. "How can I go home, having just left it for good?"

"If your father was half as anxious to get you back as his speed would indicate when he disappeared up the highway a moment ago he would be glad indeed to welcome your return."

"Merely to punish me for my disobedience," sniffed the voice. "I know him too well!"

"Then I will take you to some other relative."

"That would be asking too much of you, sir," and there was almost a titter in the voice, "for my relatives are all in England."

"Your driver," I began.

"Disappeared at the first shot."

"Your sweetheart?"

"Alas, I have not any," she sighed.

"Well," said I, "at least I can take the place of the former."

"And why not the latter?" she laughed.

"It is not yet a regular habit with me to choose my female company unseen."

It was an age of coy, shy and shrinking females tutored and schooled to modesty, retirement and studied simplicities, these being judged the accomplishments and arts best suited to entice and catch a man. But there was nothing coy or reserved about the rich laughter that rang free from the coach interior at my expense, nor anything weak and feminine about the strong, well gloved hand that swung the coach door wide for the cloaked figure of a tall young woman. Standing uncovered in the moonlight, she looked at me, and burst into noisy laughter.

"Oh, oh," she cried. "A red-headed hero!"

"A red-headed fool," I answered. "And he wears it well down on his coat collar so folk can enjoy the jest of it the longer."

"Ah," she smiled. "I doubt me not I could learn to like you!"

"The lessons will be few and short I promise."

Oh, the moon is ever a kindly old artist who draws and colours everything at its best, leaving out, or glossing over, such blemishes and defects as mar the world by day, but I swear she had no need of such subtle art in illuminating the face and figure of the woman before me. The maid was young, yet not too young, with all the grace and strength and lithe carriage of perfect health and noble youth. She was tall and somewhat generously built and yet rounded into graceful curves and splendid lines which even the cloak could not hide. Her dark hair, somewhat disar-

ranged but beautiful withal, waved into miniature hills and valleys whereon sparkled the bright sheen of soft moonbeams. The large, laughing eyes were deep and dark. And, I would have you know, there was beauty as well as strength in the white hand which she laid so anxiously, so beseechingly, so confidently upon the sleeve of my great coat.

"This is all so perfectly ludicrous and ridiculous," she began.

"I am glad if it amuses you—"

"And yet so serious!" she finished. "I'm sorry, and yet it might easily have been worse, for you. Just suppose I had not happened along and the Anti-renters had caught you?"

"Their disappointment would have been bitter," I grinned, "for I have already been robbed of everything."

She looked at me very carefully, lips smiling, eyes laughing.

"You still have youth!"

"Going fast," I admitted.

"And your liberty!"

"Threatened," I admitted, "very seriously."

"Also," she sighed, "you have a home."

"Not even one to run away from!"

"They might have given you a coat of tar and feathers."

"When this suit is gone I probably will have to resort to some such expedient."

"Oh, then you are not a prince in disguise?"

"Sorry to spoil your romance—I am the poorest, the most useless and helpless man in the world."

She stood for some little time in silence, gazing at the ground, and I noted the graceful drapery of her cloak over a fine, statuesque figure; the snowy whiteness of her skin,

except for the rich colour in each soft, well-rounded cheek.

"My father is a tyrant—a bully," said she by way of explanation.

"Ah," said I, "they all are when they will not listen to the ways of youth."

"My father has oppressed, overridden and trampled upon my feelings, my honour, sir. He, he all but sold me into slavery!"

"No!" I cried. "It can't be as bad as that."

"Well, it amounted to that anyway," she affirmed with a sigh, gathering courage to continue. "He, he wanted me to marry a man I hated—he insisted that I should."

"Ahem," said I, with new knowledge on this very subject. "It is quite the custom for parents to arrange such matters. It occurs—er—rather frequently—oft times it is all for the best. Now in China—"

"What woman of spirit would stand for such arbitrary treatment in this day and age? What woman, indeed!"

Her voice raised in a rich contralto, expressing her rebellious feelings, her strong individuality.

"None, I trust," said I, "and especially so if she loved another."

"And so I ran away."

"It looks to me as though you would have to run back."

"Never," she stepped back, clenching her strong hands with anger. "No, never! I shall not be coerced, tyrannized and ruled with a rod of iron as though I had no mind, no feelings of my own."

Evidently she was a young woman of high spirit and a will of her own, for which I admired her all the better, having no liking for the meek and lowly type of fireside and stocking-darning woman.

"And father sold me like, like a fat pig."

"He did?" Some country bumpkin, as I thought.

"Yes, he did, and to a knave, a scoundrel, a worthless good-for-nothing whom I never saw and never hope to see."

"Oh, as bad as that, eh?"

"To a villain, an ogling macaroni, a business failure—a New York upstart."

"To, to whom?" I gasped.

"Married to a name!"

"But what, what name?"

"Barent Creighton," she cried. "And that is as much as I know about him."

"It, it is enough!" I gasped, controlling myself with difficulty. "So *that* is the fellow!"

I grabbed the coach wheel for support and stared at her fascinated. My mind was all a-whirl, my heart all but stopped with abject surprise.

"Oh, but do you know him?" she cried somewhat eagerly. "Tell me!"

Speaking of jesting fates! Here was I, Barent Creighton, rescuing the very woman who was running away from home to escape marrying me! So this was Ronella Hartwell—and, well I confess a bit of shame and anger, commingled and confounded, that she should resort to such desperate means to avoid marrying me. It certainly was not flattering, to say the least!

"He doesn't amount to but little," I confessed, bringing up in mind the Barent Creighton I knew so well and arraigning the knave on the spot. "You do well to get rid of him, my lady. He is not so very old, not more than eight and twenty, I should say, and sometimes he thinks himself rather goodlooking, a pleasantry that fools no one but himself."

"Is, is he so very ugly?"

"He is about my size, if I remember correctly, and somewhat near my weight, mayhap—"

"Ah," said she.

"But he is a failure, in more ways than one, and just now he is in a pretty tight corner—and, er—somewhat confused if I can judge one rightly."

"Tell me!" she breathed.

I could not help but marvel at her interest in one whom she professed to hate so cordially.

"He is in great financial distress," I continued in a shaky voice.

"Ah," said she. "Now I understand!"

"He needs money, and I guess that is the reason why he would marry you, a woman he never saw, although had the fellow but known—"

"He is a scoundrel!" she affirmed. "Any man is a scoundrel who will marry for money."

"He certainly feels like one," said I. "And now I shall drive you home."

"No, no," she exclaimed. "I can never go back home. My father is a tyrant, he would never forgive me; he would even beat me with whips. He has given his word—signed a paper. He will force me into this marriage. We have quarrelled over this marriage agreement and I cannot go whimpering back for forgiveness, like a whipped cur."

"Nevertheless it is the only place for you tonight," I affirmed. "Jump in the coach and tell me which way to drive."

"But I do not desire to go home, sir."

I had no wish to have my fiancée wandering homeless

over the countryside. Now that I had seen her I was all the more determined to live up to our marriage agreement.

"I have decided that you must go home."

"Oh, have you, indeed!" she retorted with fine scorn.

"I think it for the best," said I. "You have no other place to go—and to stay here longer would be most unwise."

"Must?" she repeated in a threatening voice.

"Absolutely," I answered. "Will use force if necessary."

For a moment or two she stood there in the soft moonlight, her pretty head high and defiant, lips tight, her dark eyes very bright indeed, then she gathered up her skirts and without a word stepped into the coach.

"Which way?" I cried after her.

"Drive back to the Four-Corners on top of the hill," she directed.

I bowed and closed the door behind her, too excited to realize that she had not told me how to reach the Hartwell home at all. Springing into the driver's seat I cracked the whip merrily and wheeled the greys about. When we rolled down into the highway I turned back up the long hill with Ronella Hartwell riding in the coach behind me totally unconscious that her fianced husband was handling the leather reins.

A strange trick of Fate assuredly!

The coach rolled smartly along through the black shadows and over bright patches of silver moonlight, the wheels crackling over the fallen leaves and crunching at the loose stones, while the horses' hoofs beat a merry rat-i-tat-tat on the hard roadbed. Mine anger had strangely vanished and in its stead I found myself growing warm and com-

fortable with the pleasant thought of her hand upon my arm, and the sheen of the bright moonlight in her wavy brown hair.

And, as I rode, I forgot the past, forgot my business worries, forgot my desperate plight, forgot even the hateful marriage contract, and thought only of the future, of how I would drive Ronella Hartwell straight to her very door, and announce in no uncertain tones that I was the happy bridegroom come for his own. Yea, her very determination not to wed me made me all the more set to marry her, to the letter of the contract; her wilful disobedience and ridicule made me all the more desirous for the venture. Before I knew it, the gaunt signboard of the Four-Corners arose like a phantom before me and barred the way. I stopped the horses instanter and jumped down to inquire further directions to Oakwood.

"Here we are, Miss Hartwell, at the Four-Corners," I sung out merrily. "Which way now?"

I swung open the coach door as I spoke and when no answer came floating back to my eager ears I thrust my head inside to see if she had gone asleep or was in a faint.

The coach was empty!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**W**ELL!” I exclaimed in astonishment. “Well, I’ll be dashed!”

I even looked under the seat and walked all around the vehicle but there was no sign of the girl, although I knew that she had been inside the coach when we started from the wood and for at least a part of the way to the Four-Corners, for I had distinctly heard her laughing softly to herself.

I ran back along the moonlit road for a considerable distance, calling her by name, but the only answer was a sudden hush of the insect voices and a burst of weird, uncanny laughter which came floating to my ears from a little brown screech-owl perched upon a dead stub beside the road—weird laughter, and a gurgling, choking cry. She was gone, gone completely, and there was small hope of my finding her in the darkness of the wood or along the shadowy highway, so I went back to the empty coach. I confess a great and overwhelming sense of chagrin and loss.

“Well!” I exclaimed, peering anxiously into the interior of the coach, as though she might have as mysteriously returned in my absence. “It’s queer enough—the whole blamed business is queer enough!”

“I should say it were!” exclaimed the gaunt old signpost behind me, in a deep chuckling, throaty voice. “I should say it were!”

I straightened up with a jerk, my scalp bristling, my

flesh a-crawl, and my breath stopped short—it was so unusual, to say the least, for a sign-post to be a-speaking.

“Funny business—true as gospel, sir,” echoed the sign-post, chuckling louder than ever. “Funniest I ever see, sir, which do be sayin’ a lot, sir, for I’m out considerable o’ nights, sir—oh, a great deal more ’n most folk stop t’ realize, an’ I sees uncommon things, I do, such as spooks, an’ elves, an’ pixies, an’ pigwidgeons, all a-dancin’ an’ a-playin’, but never seen I sich wild goin’s-on as I’ve seed this here night, sir. No, never!”

“I dare say not,” I managed to articulate.

“Never, sir,” chuckled the Signpost. “Wildest goin’s-on as ever I seed, sir, an’ I’m outdoor o’ nights a goodish bit too—oh, a powerful lot, sir. But this’s positively th’ worst ever, with coaches a-rumblin’ up an’ down, an’ strange cries, an’ shootin’ an’ a-bangin’ an’ wild horses flamin’ through th’ tree-tops an’ coaches flyin’ over th’ mountains—”

“But did you see anything of a handsome young lady?” I began, just as though it was the most natural thing in the world for a Sign-post to hold a conversation.

“I’ve seed a dozen o’ em’ sir, a dozen this very night—as handsome as pictoors, each an’ every one o’ ’em sir. They were a-dancin’ an’ a-singin’ in th’ moonlight, wavin’ their pretty bare arms an’ droppin’ bright leaves on th’ ground, sir.”

“Did one of them have on a grey cloak?”

“Nairy a one sir, they were all what ye might call noodish, with nothin’ on more’n a gauzy bit o’ cobwebby robe, sir. But maybe I’ll see her, grey cloak an’ all, sir, ’fore th’ night ’s done.”

Now, when I stopped to think, it suddenly dawned upon

me that it was a strange thing—even in a night of strange things—that an old weather-beaten signpost, whose four arms sagged a bit as though weary with ever pointing out the way, should suddenly become so talkative, although the night seemed fairly bewitched, and that more than the usual wind-inspired squeak, so I stepped boldly forward to investigate. As I did so a short, stocky figure of a man arose from the stone foundation, where he had been seated in the inky shadow with his back against the post, and picked up a heavy leather bag from the ground at his feet, which he swung easily to his broad shoulder. For all the world, in the uncertain moonlight, he looked like the very cockswain of Hendrick Hudson's gig, but when he turned so that the light fell upon his face I saw that he was but a little old man, strangely short and wide, with a round, apple-like face encircled with a fringe of white whisker, which passed beneath his chin, leaving the russet cheeks and smiling lips quite bare. His little blue eyes were wrinkled merrily and his little round nose was very red indeed.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Why, why, I'm Jolly Jack Rogers, whippin' th' cat as ever!"

"What's so dashed funny?" I asked, rather severely, to repay him for the scare he had given me.

"Why, why, sir," he stammered, looking innocently up into my face. "Why, sir, meanin' no harm, sir, th' whole blamed, bloomin', dashed business's funny, as you was a-sayin'!"

"But there *was* a woman in the coach, and now she has gone," I explained. "A fine and handsome young woman—"

"They all be just thet a-way, sir," he interrupted, nodding very wisely. "Most uncommon young lookin' an' handsome they be, sir."

"But this was the finest woman I ever saw," I began.

"Every last one, sir, is alwus th' very best lookin'—until another comes. It's alwus that-a-way with these ere fairies, sir."

"Fairies?"

"Exzackly," he chuckled deep in his whiskered throat. "Th' woods hereabouts be full o' 'em sir, but they never wus so thick as tonight—no, never! I've seed more'n a dozen already, sir, jest a sittin' there on that stun, an' th' night hardly started. It's uncommon right fer 'em tonight, with th' harvest moon so full an' bright, an' th' sky an' leaves so pretty—Lord, how I loves t' watch 'em, sir!"

"But she *was* in the coach and now she has *gone*."

"It's a way they have, sir, a most tantalizin' an' tormentin' way, sir. You sees 'em—then *whist*, an' they be gone, sir. An' you may run an' call fer 'em t' come back but only th' screech-howls'll laugh at y', sir—laugh uncommon loud an' long at y', sir."

"Oh, the devil!" I cried impatiently. "I don't believe any such nonsense."

"Well, there ain't nobody as axes y' t' believe it, is they?" he screamed petulantly, shifting his heavy bag nervously from shoulder to shoulder. "Nobody as axes y' t' believe it, is they?"

"But she *was* in the coach—"

"Ex-zackly! An' now she's gone—wanished," he chuckled, "Remember nobody as axes y' t' believe it, but what better proof do y' want that it wus but a prank o' th' wood fairies—what better proof I axes?"

"She's around here somewhere—I will find her."

"Ho, ho, hooooo!" he garuffed. "You'll find her? I've tried that, young feller, time an' time agin, but I never cotched one—no, never! I've watched an' waited an' tried t' sneak up an' grab 'em, but they're quick, I tell ye—uncommon quick an' clever, sir."

It suddenly occurred to me that I was losing valuable time arguing with the simple old dolt. It would be but natural for the young woman to send me in the exact opposite direction from the one she was planning to go and, undoubtedly, while I stood there arguing with the fool, she was making good time to the nearest village. I jumped to the box and wheeled the horses about. At every bend of the highway I expected to see the grey-cloaked figure hurrying across the stretches of highway where the moon shone brightest. I peered into every black shadow beneath the trees as I passed and watched the road far ahead, all to no purpose.

It was almost as light as day, but such a different light; a peculiar luminous glow flooding down to earth with wonderful brightness. The sparkling dew caught up the moonbeams as they fell and hurled them back in streaming rays of transplendent light. Way, way off to the north a silvery star streaked down the greenish sky, tearing asunder the curtain of night, only to vanish with a spray of sparks, into the great unknown. And the lustre of the moonlight upon the shimmering river was like burnished metal before the fire wherein was reflected the yellow moon itself as though it had suddenly plunged down and lay glowing beneath the flood.

Peace and quiet reigned over the scene of the recent hold-up. I stopped the coach under the trees and looked all about as though, perchance, milady had chosen to return. But there was not a glimpse of the characters who

had so recently enacted that bit of roadside play. The crickets had renewed their orchestral love calls and the ripening leaves were nervously and excitedly rustling, as they whispered in awed tones of the mighty event, telling it o'er and o'er to the last detail, with many sighs and exclamations, as though the like had ne'er happened before in all the world.

There was nothing to do but drive on, so on I went, looking out for the first wayside tavern where I expected to find my coach, the Manor Lord and Deacon Commings. Soon out of the brilliant night ahead came the swelling murmur of excited voices and buildings reflecting many flickering lights as lanthorns were hurried to and fro. I pulled around a sharp bend in the road and there before me was the little sleeping country village of Esperance clustered on either side of the wide highway, with a low, rambling, steep-roofed, vine-clad tavern just ahead on the left showing many lights. The faded old sign bore the washed-out portrait of a man but no evidence of a name.

The front of the inn was quite deserted so I drove slowly around into the wagon yard where a group of excited countrymen were crowded close about an empty coach and two steaming horses, while an aged negro driver, in rumpled green livery, stood on the box explaining in a loud voice, his adventures of the night. I stopped the greys in the dense shadow of the building, out of range of the lanthorns, and because of the uproar no one noticed my coming.

"—an' den we dashed 'mong 'em, dribin' like de ol' debbil, with Mister Cogglesbury an' de other gemmen shootin' from de coach winders, *bangity-bang-bang*, as fas' as dey could load, an' me, with th' lines in my teef, a-cut-tin' loose with dis heah ole gun loaded with slugs. . . ."

"Jest listen t' thet, Jan Budge!" cried a listener.

The negro grabbed up the empty shotgun and illustrated to the awed bystanders how he had accomplished the annihilation of the Anti-renters.

". . . a-shootin' an' a-yellin', while de Injuns were a-fallin' from their hosses thick an' fast, dead an' dyin', an' the young gemman he jumps out, a-shootin' an' a-whoopin', an' I sees him shot down—"

"Killed!" cried one.

"Jest listen t' thet, Jan Budge!"

"Murdered!" exclaimed another.

"Oh, th' bloody cut-throats!"

"Deadt!" shouted a gigantic fat Dutchman in white apron who could be none other than the proprietor. "*O God behoede ons daarvoor!*"

"As a hammer-head," nodded the negro. "All stark an' bloody. An den de ole debbil himself comes a-tearin down de hill in a fiery coach. . . ."

"Fiery coach!" ejaculated a listener. "Oh, Lord!"

"*God loone het u!*" groaned the Dutchman. "*Een kwadelgeest?*"

"No one was killed, you addle-pated old fool," I shouted, driving closer. "Shut up and put those wet horses out, and rub them dry, every hair, you hear me, if it takes a week. You infernal black liar, you!"

As the coach rumbled into the barn there came to my ears a shrill, quavering, old man's voice raised in derision.

"What y' got t' say now, Jan Budge? What y' got t' say now, I asks?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A LONG, low ceilinged, high paneled room answered for tap-room, sitting room and reading room in one, as is the fashion among country hostelries to this very day. The oak panelling was aged a dark brown and the plastered space above was ornamented with painted pictures, one of three race horses stretched out in full speed, another a little ship ploughing a deep blue sea, and still another of a dog asleep by the hearth and a number of large posters and official flyers printed in black-face type and illustrated with wood cuts, announcing Byrd Prince, sixteen hands, a rich dark bay; a farm for sale, including stock; a vendue of household goods; committee meetings; general training days, etc. Near the street door was arranged a little black walnut bar, polished to a rich metallic lustre, and behind it, on sundry shelves, stood a regiment of bottles of various shapes, colours and sizes, erected on a bulwark of stout barrels and heavy stone jugs. This bar was adorned with a round little keg, boasting a stalwart spigot, with a bead of brown ale sparkling on the end of the tap ready to drop into the shiny copper pot below. Near the centre of this room was a wide fireplace, holding a few smoking logs, with lighted candles on the mantel and a steaming kettle on the swinging crane in case any one should order "something hot."

All the commotion and excitement of the court yard had not interrupted a four-handed game of cards which still continued, serene and absorbing, about a round table in

one corner of the room. A sperm oil lamp with a tin shade lighted the table for the players and a little pile of bright shillings and coppers evidenced that the play was not for fun alone. The four old men did not even look up as I came into the room; stolidly and emphatically they threw down the worn and dirty cards in play, knuckles crashing on the board, looking neither to the right nor the left as the noisy crowd followed behind me.

In a far corner who should I find but brave Martinus awaiting me, come riding post haste, on his good mare Foxy, in answer to my hurried summons.

"Martinus!" I cried.

"Barent!"

Never were two friends more glad to meet.

"I got your letter and rode up to help you—"

His material help consisted of a buckskin bag heavy with coin.

Here a tall, ungainly, self-important countryman slouched up. His face was very long and narrow, his eyes were small, close together and deep seated. His homespun garments hung very loose and baggy about his big-jointed frame and his manners were even less secure.

"Here you, my laddy-buck," he called loudly, blinking his little eyes and motioning to me with one long grimy forefinger. "Come this way, sir."

I did not deign to notice the fellow.

"You hear me?" he snorted with considerable authority.

"Come here, I say!"

"Oh, bartender, bartender!" I called, drumming upon the table. And, when that aproned Dutch dignitary, who was also the proprietor, came waddling and puffing up, I added: "Please throw this insolent stable-boy out of the back door where he belongs, and none too carefully either."

"*Ach goede God!*" gasped the robust tavern keeper, almost turning pale beneath the rosy colour of his huge cheeks and coppery nose. "*O goede God, ik vrees de gevolgen!* He vas der Bailiff ov der County, sir!"

"Stable-boy, hey!" roared the enraged countryman as he tried in vain to thrust the heavy tavern keeper aside. "I'll learn you that I'm th' Bailiff o' this here Bailiwick, I be."

"*Ja!*" nodded the tavern keeper.

"I'm th' High Sheriff," he blustered. "My word is law. When th' Sheriff speaks you better be all ears—ab-so-lutely! When I asks a question you better answer right up sharp—blister me if you hadn't."

"Oh, Jan Budge!" exclaimed a bystander, which was followed with snorts of rude laughter.

The High Sheriff wheeled like a flash and searched the circle of mobile faces with glittering and baneful eye.

"Who thinks that's so funny?" he demanded sharply. "Laugh now if you dare! Th' first man that titters a titter I'll snap th' gyves on him quicker'n scat—blister me if I won't!"

It is quite needless to add that no one laughed. Indeed, I never saw a more sober or solemn-faced crowd than at that very instant.

"I'm the High Sheriff!" he yelled, turning to me, "and I want to know what you know about this here hold-up in th' highway."

"Mighty little," said I.

"I mean to catch th' rascals—ab-so-lutely!" he affirmed.

"You won't have to look far," said I.

"How many of those desperate knaves wus they?" asked the Bailiff.

"I'm sure I don't know."

"But which, which way did they go after the raid?" asked the Bailiff eagerly. "It all depends on that!"

"They went," said I, "towards the Four-Corners."

"The Four-Corners!" repeated the Bailiff, sighing with evident relief. "Out o' my jurisdiction, thank Gawd!"

"Jest listen to that now, Jan Budge!" exclaimed someone in the audience, evidently an old man, from the voice. "They went t'wards th' Four-Corners."

"Well, clew me down, what if they did?" answered he who was evidently Jan Budge, in a thin, squeaky voice. "What if they did, I asks?"

"Why, why, they're out o' th' Sheriff's Bailiwick, that's wot."

"Ab-so-lutely! but if they'd only a-stayed here where I got jurisdiction I'd a cotched 'em," added the Bailiff. "Blister me if I wouldn't!"

"Oh, yes, indeedy, you'd a got 'em all right enough 'Bige—only they're gone, jest like th' rest."

"The rest!" cried the Sheriff.

"Why, all them other criminals an' willums what has 'scaped ye, 'Bige, since your term begun."

"I'd jest like to see th' villun that could escape me, if they'd stay in my Bailiwick long enough—blister me if I wouldn't!"

"But ye can't expect 'em to hang 'round here for ever, 'Bige."

"After a few years they wander away, 'Bige."

"We don't want 'em charges on th' town, 'Bige."

Here the other listeners took up the cudgels of debate and formed sides for and against chasing the Anti-renters, even if they had ridden out of the Bailiwick. The violent

exercise of their throats and tongues demanded that the argument be continued nearer the bar, where liquids were at hand for instant use, leaving us in peace in our corner.

A strange hush of harsh voices—a stillness as disturbing and noticeable as thunder, interrupted us. I looked up and there in the open doorway, framed in the darkness, stood the white-haired old circuit rider.

“To you I speak and give warning!” It was like the cry of a prophet. No sound followed these thundered words.

“Down on your knees!” he roared, levelling a shaking hand at the figures at the bar; “down, down, humble yourselves in the dirt before thy God and beg for forgiveness and mercy, for the end of all flesh is come before me.”

They only stared at him in amazement.

“Remember I have warned you. Remember I have given you His holy word—that the body of sin shall be destroyed *the first Sabbath in November!* The earth shall heave and toss, the sea shall sweep over the land, the very heavens shall fall, for God has resolved to destroy all the wicked, and this world of sin shall be purged for ever in the fires of hell!”

A roar of laughter greeted him, lashing the old man to a frenzy. He bore down upon them, roaring, shaking his huge bony fists in their leering faces.

“Laugh! Roar! Sneer!” he bellowed. “You’ll have a thousand—thousand years in hell to repent your folly. Laugh! Mock! Crow! You will not mock when your fear cometh. But remember that I have warned ye! God will destroy man and beast, your foolish pictures and molten images!”

“That’s right, Elder, give ’em fits,” laughed one.

“Scare the very devil out of ’em!”

“Crazy!” commented a man near us.

“As a loon,” agreed his companion.

“Oh Lord, do not pity, nor spare, but destroy!”

In a loud, quavering, tearful voice The Elder prayed for their souls, that their sins and levity might be forgiven so that they might be saved even at the eleventh hour.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TJERCK VAN KLEEK, rotund, well-fed and mighty of girth, the owner and proprietor of *Big Nose* tavern (as it was incongruously called) stood at the kitchen doorway with my early breakfast in his ponderous hands. With one huge foot he kicked the door shut behind him. and, as he did so, a blue china plate slipped off his mighty forearm and shivered on the polished hardwood floor.

"*Hemel!*" grunted Tjerck.

At the first step a knife and fork dropped between his fat fingers and rattled down.

"*Donder en bliksem!*" boomed Tjerck.

He advanced towards the table, deftly balancing a plate of ham and eggs, a pile of golden brown buckwheat cakes, a small pitcher of maple syrup and a cup of coffee. The cup rattled along the saucer, teetered perilously on the edge, lost its balance and emptied its hot contents onto the broad expanse of Tjerck's tightly fitting shirt front, then broke into a thousand pieces on the floor.

"*Vervloekt! voor den duivel!*" cried Tjerck, dancing towards the table where I sat, his scarlet moon-face contorted with agony, and fairly throwing the dishes at my head so he could grasp the front of his coffee soaked trousers and hold them away from his tender flesh. "*Ik heb mij aan de buik gebrand!*"

"Scald you, sir?" I asked, stifling a grin.

"*Ja!*"

"It will feel better when it gets well," said I.

"Vat!" cried Tjerck, glowering at me. "Better ver id gets vell, foolish!"

"It won't hurt so much when the pain stops."

He stood and looked at me in bewilderment, unable to comprehend, running the sentence over in his head and trying hard to translate it into Holland Dutch so he could understand it.

"*Helass!*" said he, giving it up entirely. "I vill get id fer you anoder cups ov *koffie* at vonce, sir, if I don't fall in id und drown mineself."

"Better bring it in a basket," I suggested.

"Vat, a paskit!" he cried, winking his little eyes. "Now how in *donder* could I pring *koffie* mid a paskit yet?"

"The cup, I mean—then you won't drop it."

"*Hm!*—it's vooman's work!" grunted Tjerck. "It's vooman's vork anyhow, und mine hands be too much like feets to serve mid th' dishes."

"Then why don't you leave it to the women?" I asked.

"Leave it mid th' vimmin, stupid!" he roared, waving his ponderous hands in disgust. "*God loone het u!* dare ain't no vimmin! Dare iss only *mijne dochter Zara* und her has all she can did to look the house after, since *mijne vrouw* Crestina vent away foreffer. Und Zara must neffer coom to the barroom. Und so, you sees, ven she und me are agones, vy I haf to do vimmin's work.—*Ach, God welke ellendige tijden!* Every veek I must get id a new girl—und every veek they be gones. Ach, if only I could id get a girl so homely as ever vas, und so ugly as a vild cats, yaas; und deaf und dumbs, so dat no mans vould ever vant to make id a marry mid her, und den I could keep id a girl for may be at least von veek."

"Ah, so they will get married?"

"Married!" he roared, his face redder than ever, his

coppery nose taking on a deeper hue. "*O Mijn God!* Vy ids shoost like dey vas gettin' the bans und der ring as to coom to *Big Nose* for to vork. Married—*Och!* They do mighty little else but marry und so hard they be to find, *Ja!*"

"Then why," I asked, "don't you call this tavern '*Love's Last Resort*,' or the '*Marriage Bell*,' instead of *Big Nose* when the sign is something else anyway?"

"Why! Vell 'cause id joost refuses to be called anything else, dot's why."

"Refuses—the tavern refuses?"

"Eh-heh," he nodded. "I named id mineselfs six times, an' ten shillin' fer each sign, but they vant call id nod-dings but *Big Nose*, so *Big Nose* she stays foreffer fer all of me."

And then he disappeared kitchenward to return presently with the rest of my breakfast which was ample enough in every way to last a strong man the remainder of the day. While I was busy plying knife and fork Tjerck betook himself to the little bar at the other end of the room, donned a white apron and began savagely to polish the woodwork and mirrors, muttering the while to himself in Dutch and, no doubt, cursing the Fates that he should have to stoop to "vimmin's vork." As I watched him between sips of delicious coffee the street door was pushed slowly open and an ancient, wrinkled, wizen face, almost hidden by a flapping old felt hat, appeared in the aperture.

"Mornin', Tjerck," called the old man as he hobbled in.

"*Goeden morgen*," answered Tjerck, smiling pleasantly, as the law of trade demands, at his first customer for the day. "How you vas feelins dis mornin', Jot?"

"Porely, porely," answered Jot, fetching a mighty sigh, as he shuffled toward the bar. He was indeed a very old man and his bent, scrawny figure, supported by a heavy, crooked cane, was garbed in an ancient suit of small clothes, long out of date, with red homeknit stockings flapping about his spindling calves. His thin white hair was gathered into a cue behind and tied with a bit of black shallon. "I'm ailin', Tjerck, ailin' all th' while it do seem," he groaned.

"*Och!* I dought you vas drinkin' gins, Jot," gruffed Tjerck. "Gins vor your rheumatix, or someding."

"Don't, don't ever jest with sickness an' death, Tjerck," cautioned the old man, waving a warning crooked old finger. "It's a bad sign, a werry bad an' most unlucky sign, Tjerck, fer a well man t' jest with death. Many an' many a man, Tjerck, as strong as a bear, has died fer them werry words, Tjerck. Y' knows I didn't mean thet I wus a-drinkin' ale, Tjerck. I'm a man yet, I be, fer all my age, an' I drinks a man's drink, when it can be said I drinks a-tall, Tjerck; which ain't more'n half a dozen times a day, except maybe it's a Saturday or a Sunday, or I ain't feelin' right, or on some special occasion, Tjerck."

"Some gins vill help your stomach, vat?" suggested Tjerck.

"They ain't no help fer my old tomick, Tjerck. I'm walkin' sick, I be, this werry minute," groaned the old man. "I could scarce eat no breakfast at all, only a couple o' aigs, Tjerck, an' them poached. Poached, d'ye hear! Poached like as fer sick folks, an' not hard biled as a real man likes 'em, Tjerck. Jest those two aigs an' a few pannycakes, not more'n eight or ten pannycakes, Tjerck, an' them smallish—or maybe a dozen at th' most, with jest a sprinklin' o' pork gravy on 'em, Tjerck, jest

enough t' grease 'em so I could choke 'em down, with th' help o' a couple o' cups o' strong coffee. I tell y' it's mighty tough t' be off yer feed, Tjerck."

"*He!* I shoul't say!" echoed Tjerck. "Vonce when I vas youngish I didn't eats noddings fer a whole day—*Goede God!*"

"An' I ain't sleepin' like I should, Tjerck," continued old Jot. "I ain't a-gettin' th' rest thet an old man should, Tjerck. Yesterday I didn't ketch more'n an hour's snooze in th' afternoon when I ought t' a had two, anyway, with th' sun a-shinin' down so warm an' cozy like, Tjerck. An' I set up last night till a-most ten, Tjerck, 'fore I felt th' least bit sleepy an' I wus awake quite a spell 'fore daylight, too, Tjerck."

"*Poom!* I knows shoost how you feels," nodded Tjerck. "Vonce I lay me avake for a whole hour before I vent to sleeps—*Goede God!*"

"An' I can feel my mind a-slippin', slippin', Tjerck," quavered the old man. "I can feel her a-goin', Tjerck. Yesterday I guessed on th' weight o' thet steer Frank the Butcher killed, an' what d'ye think? I didn't come within seven pound o' it, Tjerck. Seven pound! I tell y' my mind be a-goin' Tjerck, a-slippin' an' a-slippin' back all th' while."

"*Hoa!* I tell id to you a secret," answered Tjerck, hoarsely. "I vas in der same conditions, *Ja!* Yesterday I gave'd a man th' wrong boddle—th' first time in two years, *hm!* He asks vor *rogge* visky und I gives him *Koren* visky—vat a terrible mistakens!"

Here Tjerck picked up a short, squat bottle from the long array behind the bar, wiped it carefully and lovingly on his spotless white apron and spun it deftly on the polished bar so that it hopped and skipped and danced

along and finished with a flourish and a little jig right before the old man's eager eyes, gurgling and chuckling as though it was only too happy to be consumed.

Picking up his well-filled glass with a remarkably steady hand for one so far from health the old man was just about to sample the contents when he was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"Heave to, heave to, mates! Dry as a woodpecker's upper lip I be."

And, with this greeting, in came a second old man in a long blue coat, a narrow brimmed varnished hat, short, wide breeches and wrinkled white stockings, his corrugated and leathery old face all a twinkle as he came, chuckling and grinning, to the bar.

"What y' got t' say now, Jan Budge?" demanded old Jot from the bar in a shrill, high pitched voice as he grabbed the newcomer by his thin arm with one clawlike hand. "What y' got t' say now? I wants t' know. What y' got t' say after last night's wild doin's, Jan Budge?"

Any one could tell from the short blue coat, from the eel-skin on his old queue, as well as by the flagrant tattoo emblems on his wrinkled old hands that this newcomer was of the sea.

"Wot have I got t' say!" echoed Jan Budge, as though the taunting words stung him deep, pounding the floor with his cane and banging the bar with his knotty old fist. "Wot have I got t' say, y' asks, do y'? Shove off an' I'll tell y', old Jot, shove off! Keep your old grapples out o' my riggin, an' I'll tell y'. I've jest got this much t' say, I have, you're full o' bilge, old Jot, full o' bilge t' your hatches, or you'd know this town ain't wot it wus when I wus young. I vum an' declare—not by a darn

sight it bean't. It's as quiet as a grave, it be; deader'n a cemetery, it be; still as a Quaker prayer meetin' it be, th' doldrums on a muggy day, an' a-gettin' wuss an' wuss every year, too. That's wot I've got t' say, if y' wants t' know—so shove off, mate, shove off!"

"Ha! stick t' it till y' die, will ye!" exploded old Jot. "Swear thet th' town be as quiet an' as solemn as a hearse, will ye? Insist thet it's no more lively than a corp nor a mummy if y' wants t', Jan Budge, but y' knows right well there never wus any sich wild doin's in these here parts as happened last night right under our werry noses."

"By th' holy—o' course I sticks to it!" yelled Jan Budge, "like a shark sucker to a copper bottom," flourishing his cane about his head. "Dash my dead-lights, why wouldn't an' honest an' truth tellin' sailor stick t' th' facts, I asks? Wot does a hold-up in th' highway amount t', eh? Wot does it amount t', I asks?"

"Th' times be more lively now—"

"Back an' fill if y' want t', old Jot," snarled Jan. "Your argument hain't wind enough fer steerage way, Jot. Th' times be dead, I tell y'—dead as Davy Jones' crew. An' this old town—by th' runnin lights o' Satan's brig!—if you'd ever seen Liverpool, er Lonnon, er Harve er N' Orleans—"

"Jest cities, Jan Budge; jest poisonous, stinkin', dirty cities, Jan, full o' vice an' crime,—"

"Ha, ha," cackled the old salt, "an' you call last night's tea party adventure, Jot? Why, why sir, if you'd a been on th' *Bon-homme* with John Paul, or in th' South Seas 'long with Captain Creighton when we found th' Spanish ship with a dead man a hangin' in her rusty chains, an' a great tree a-growin—"

"Don't y' dare, Jan Budge, don't y' dare! Don't y' assault my old ears with thet wild sea yarn o' yours agin. Tough, I be, an' kin stand a lot, but don't y' dare—don't y' dare tell it agin."

"Y' don't believe it eh," screamed old Jan. "Y' don't believe—"

"All thet's ancient history, it don't matter whether I believe it or not," answered Jot. "Today's news 's what y' want, Jan. Th' great excitement this morning is, they ain't found Squire Hartwell's daughter yet."

"No, y' don't say!" cried Jan. "Wasn't she at hum?"

"Not hide nor hair o' her. Not a rag or a tag, an' old Hartwell nigh crazy with grief an' scourin' th' whole country high an' low for her."

"Gondt!" cried Tjerck.

"Gone!" I echoed, jumping up. "Miss Hartwell gone!"

"Vanished in the night," answered Jot, gazing at me in astonishment. "Now, whatever—"

But I waited to hear no more, hurrying out of the tap-room to my own quarters up stairs where I had left my hat and stick. But one thought was uppermost in my mind, seeming to fill my entire brain—Ronella Hartwell had not gone home; she had disappeared and I must find her!

Martinus had just finished shaving when I burst into the room.

"The woman I am to marry has disappeared!" I cried.

"Curse the unearthly noises of the country that won't let a man sleep," accompanied the splashing of water from the pitcher. "Cocks crew—cows bellowed—calves blatted—cats howled—and hired men yelled from hilltop to hilltop! Never did day break so noisily! Oh—curse the quiet country anyway, I wish I—"

"Martinus, Ronella Hartwell has run away!" I repeated.

"Well, what of it?" answered Martinus very coolly.

"You can get another, can't you?"

"Not—not a trace of her can be found!"

"Well," splashed Martinus from the wash basin. "You are marrying land, as I understand it, and not any woman in particular."

"She has not been seen since I helped her into the coach."

"Probably nothing more serious than that she has kept right on running," puffed Martinus from the towel.

"Running!" I cried.

"Yes, running away from you; wasn't that what she started out to do?" he asked petulantly.

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll bet she saw your red head and is running yet."

In disgust I turned and left him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHERE the maid could have gone was mystery enough to perplex most any one. That she believed her father a tyrant was evident and that she was afraid to go home I knew, but where she was, and where to look for her, was the question. I had a vague sense of something which prompted me to return to the place where I had last seen her and to begin my hunt from there while her father scoured the village and prepared to beat the forest.

I found, without difficulty, the brush grown woodroad up which I had driven the Hartwell coach in the soft moonlight and a short walk brought me to the little clearing wherein I had turned the greys about. With daylight all the romance and mystery had departed from this fairy circle but the wheel ruts, cut deep into the damp sod, convincing me that the incident was real enough. Two or three noisy blue jays shrieked anathema upon my head for daring to disturb them at their beech nut breakfast and several loquacious red squirrels snarled and sputtered and jabbered their displeasure because I was searching the ground near where they had hidden certain caches of butternuts against the cruel hunger of approaching winter.

At last I found the place where my boots had ploughed deep into the yielding turf when I had jumped from the driver's seat of the Hartwell coach. And, close beside them, the damp grass was crushed and bruised and in the soft loam I made out the impression of two small, sharp heels.

"So it wasn't the fairies after all," I remarked, half aloud, as I bent over to examine them closer.

"No, no! It was all real enough."

This sentence, uttered in a strange, mournful voice behind me, brought me from the ground with startling rapidity, my breath catching in my throat, and it was with the greatest physical effort that I was able to turn around to see from whence had issued this chance remark.

It was the Silent Woman of the Cross Roads.

"Oh, good sir," she cried. "It was all real enough—he made me believe—then dragged me down," she went on in a sobbing, pleading voice, her gaunt hands outstretched towards me. "Surely you will help me to find him."

Her faded hair was streaming down over her worn face and her voice shook with sobs. Worn and tattered rags barely covered her emaciated frame. And, gloating in my presence, the Demon of Unrest, which tortured this poor woman into believing that she had lost some one, goaded and lashed her mind to greater fury.

"Of course I will help you, mother," I soothed. "Sit down and rest now, you are tired."

"Oh, sir, I cannot sit down, not for a minute. There is no rest for the sinful and I must hurry—hurry—or I will be too late."

"I will help you, mother—" I began, thinking that I could, at least, buy her food and a place to rest.

But she seemed not to hear, standing there as though thinking hard. Then she turned and raced swiftly away through the wood at astonishing speed and was quickly out of sight.

Sadly and slowly I returned to the Post Road and made my way towards the foot of Breakneck Hill, watching every

inch of the roadway as I progressed for duplicates of the tiny heel marks. There were tracks a-plenty but never the ones I sought. Here a baby footed raccoon had pattered along in the wet mud of the ditch; a grey squirrel had crossed the dusty road in short hops; a flock of partridges had stopped to dust their feathers. Twice I saw the dainty tracks where a doe and fawn had crossed the road during the night, and there were rabbit tracks galore, but never a sign of the little shoe marks for which I was looking. This puzzled me more than ever. Ronella Hartwell had not passed the Four-Corners and there was not a mark in the road to indicate that she had walked towards the village. The only answer seemed to be that she had wandered away into the woods, just as she had threatened. While I was moving slowly along, near the middle of the hill, I should judge, with my eyes fixed upon the leaf strewn roadbed, I heard a familiar voice singing.

"Oh, it's all to you
And it's nothin' to me,
But such darned actions
I don't like to see."

I looked up and there before me, seated on a stone beside the road, was Jolly Jack Rogers, the whip-the-cat shoemaker, his heavy tool bag at his feet. Daylight revealed that his homespun clothing was faded and roughly patched, evidently with his own waxed-end. His boots were badly worn and full of gaping holes.

"Good mornin'," greeted he cordially.

"The same to you, sir."

"Lost something?" he asked as though anxious to help me.

"Why, yes!" I laughed. "Three fortunes, four key-

holes, also the keys, some gold gods, a map, most of my self-respect and my bride-to-be!"

"Well," said he. "If you should lose your clothes you wouldn't have anything left but your life."

"And that the least valuable of all just now."

"Well," he smiled. "It's th' only valuable thing I've ever been able to save."

"You seem to spend most of it seated along the highway."

"Most o' it, sir?" he nodded cheerfully. "Well nigh all o' it, I should say." He produced a short pipe and proceeded to fill it from his pocket, carefully picking wax, bristles and other debris from the loose tobacco. "An' whut with th' shoemakers gettin' thicker an' thicker, sir, each an' every year, sir, most like I 'll have nothin' t' do at all, sir, arter a bit, but jest sit on a cold stun beside th' road an' listen t' th' fairies, sir."

"Then business, I take it, is poor."

"Poor!" he cried, waving the little black pipe so that the tobacco rained upon the ground. "Poor! Why, sir, thet word don't hardly do th' sitooation justice, it don't. It falls far below th' mark, sir. Business is positive th' worst ever, 'pon my soul! An' I'll tell ye why, sir, it's 'cause every other man ye meet these days thinks he's a shoemaker."

"And still, every one has to wear boots," I suggested.

"Oh, not a tall, sir—not a tall. In th' summer they jest goes barefut, like red-legged geese, sir, in spite o' briars, an' flints an' stubbed toes an' stun-bruises an' all, sir. Grown men an' wimmin barefut—jest think o' it, sir! Red-legged geese! Oh, most every day now I'm a wishin' I'd learned t' be a clock-tinker or a tin-maker man, sir."

"'To the cow the other hill is always greener,'" I quoted.

"Why, sir, as t' thet, sir, I've knowed any number o' skilled an' clever clock-tinkers t' die, sir, like other human folk. Once I found one propped up agin a tree beside th' road, sir, with his lap full o' leetle wooden cog-wheels an' his two hands in th' bowels o' a clock—stone dead! An' now an' then a tin-maker man is found dead in a fence corner, sir. Oh, I seed one myself, only a couple o' days ago, with his old black blow-pipe a stickin' out o' his weskit pocket, his little hammer in his hand. Yes, sir, clock-tinkers an' tin-maker men dies young, they dies uncommon young—but who in thunder ever saw a dead shoe-maker, I axes?"

"Nobody," I laughed. "I guess they never die."

"O' course they don't!" he nodded. "Never wus so many shoemakers in th' history o' th' world. Seems t' me you could use a good pair o' walkin' boots—somethin' in black colt, light an' stylish, strong an' well made?"

"No," said I. "And I could scarce pay for them if I did."

"Thet's a general complaint, sir. Oh, a—"

Behind us in the wood a woman screamed, bringing me up standing.

"What, what was that?" I gasped.

"Thet? Oh, thet's th' Silent Woman, poor soul," answered Jack as he struck flint and steel to light his old black pipe.

"She doesn't seem to be living up to her name," I sighed with relief.

"She only yells like thet oncet in a while," explained Jack. "She's always a-trapsein' 'round here, hippetihoppin' from place t' place—crazy 's a bed-bug, poor thing!"

Alwus lookin' fer some man whut's left her—had his fill an' gone."

"Poor woman!"

"Many an' many a night I've seed her a-runnin' along in th' moonlight, her grey hair a-flyin' in th' wind, like a witch, sir—jest like a sorrowin' witch, sir. An' she's alwus a-cryin' an' a-moanin' like a spirit damned an' oh, it makes me all a-shiver with gooseflesh .jest t' think o' it sir!"

"It's too bad!"

"Oh, I sees some uncommon sights, I do. Dead men an' all o' that. Look ye, here's but a leetle bit o' foolish scribblin' an' yet it cost a man his life."

From his tool bag he pulled the leaden case with the manuscript in a foreign hand.

"Why, Jack," I cried. "How come you by that?"

"Found it, by a dead man—a layin' in th' wood—a hole in his gizzard, sir. He'd crawled in there t' die, clutchin' this thing in his white hands."

"What kind of a man, Jack?"

"A short, heavy-set, oldish sort of a foreigner with earrings an' lip whiskers. Oh, he looked a powerful wicked man in his day, young fellow."

"That bit of paper, Jack, is mine," I explained. "It was stolen from me but a few days ago."

"Then ye best fling it away at once. It's cost a power o' good lives, already—" cautioned he as he handed it over. "An' I never could see th' good o' writin! It's all foolishness, says I, an' leads t' nothin' but trouble. Now look at this man, sir, dead an' gone, with a hole in his gizzard, all 'cause o' a leetle foolish writin' on a bit o' paper."

He swung his heavy bag of tools onto his broad shoul-

der with the ease and economy of effort which comes only with long practice.

"I must be goin'," said he. "But if it's tracks you're lookin' for, young man, why, there's one jest under yer nose, sir."

I looked down into the roadbed at my feet and there in the soft wood dirt was the impression of a dainty feminine shoe. It was identical with those I had found in the little clearing at the foot of the hill. When I looked up to thank Jolly Jack he had already vanished around a bend in the road and only the faint blue smoke from his glowing pipe came drifting back to tell which way he had gone.

I looked again at the footprint and at the wood towards which it seemed to point, and then it was I made out a little narrow pathway running close beside the rock where Jolly Jack has been seated and disappearing down one of the great aisles between the trees towards the hills. A little way along this path I found another heel mark and thus I knew for a certainty that the missing girl was not in the river.

It was ever so dainty a little pathway, winding in and out between the boles of mighty maples, bordered on either side with sassafras and hazel brush, for all the world as though the wild folk of the great wood had first laid out its winding course to be trod later by human feet. It dipped down into little hollows, where grew strange red berries and great ferns, and it climbed up hillocks which were quite open and free from brush. It skirted shelving rocks and zig-zagged between the heavy bodied white birches.

Soon my eyes caught the bright sheen of glistening water ahead and in a few minutes more I walked out upon the shore of a little mountain lake of sparkling clearness,

situated in a hollow between guarding, forest clad hills which might well be called young mountains. I stood back from the water a little ways in an old pasture, fascinated and enchanted by the wild beauty of the scene. O'er the rippling water a belted blue kingfisher poised on vibrant wings, ready to strike. On my right the clearing widened into green meadow land and down near the lake, at the other side of a tiny bay, was a snug little log cabin from the wide chimney of which blue smoke towered straight up until it merged into the deeper blue above.

And then I looked down towards the shore on my left, where stood a great, widearmed chestnut tree, and beneath it, seated on a shelving rock, was the object of my search
—Ronella Hartwell.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I MADE all the noise I could in advancing over the greensward, rattling my stick on the stones, shuffling through the leaves, but she never so much as turned her head in my direction.

The knowledge that she must have heard brought me up in confusion behind her. I coughed loudly.

"Well?" said she.

"Quite well, I thank you."

"And what do *you* want."

"A wife," said I very truthfully, "a few acres of land and some ready money to hand."

At this she came to her feet quickly enough, facing me with flashing eyes.

"So, it is you!"

"'T is, I," bowing very low before her. "But one of many in the highways and byways, o'er hill and dale, to, er, rescue you—"

"Again!" she cried as though she did not quite comprehend.

I nodded. "Your father is much distraught," I explained. "He has alarmed the entire countryside and they are searching for you everywhere."

"Your labour for your pains, sir. I shall not go home."

"Where will you go?"

"What difference does it make to you where I go?"

"Oh, a great deal—you see, I can't be searching all outdoors continuously in order to rescue you, every little while, from one thing and another."

"Don't trouble yourself. It is my serious intention to stay right here."

"That makes it easier for me," I sighed, sitting down on the rock.

"Best to pick out a softer seat," she advised, "if you expect to remain until you find wife and money here."

"Your father is very humble and forgiving—" I began.

"Just now, perhaps," she interrupted, "but if he could find me he would have me locked in my room and fed on bread and water, as a fit punishment for my willful behaviour, until he could deliver me to, to my bought and paid for husband."

"Bought and paid for!" I shuddered involuntarily at the words.

"It amounts to that," she sighed. "But that conceited individual will find me a sorry bargain—if ever he is so unfortunate as to get me."

"He, he will certainly claim you."

"I shall tear his face with my nails!" she cried in anger. "I shall lash him with my dog whip if he dares to speak to me!"

She was very wonderful in her anger, standing now so strong and straight, her cheeks red and flaming, her dark eyes narrowed and flashing. Surely this was not a woman a man might easily handle. Her fine body was delicately poised, as firm and strong as it was graceful, flowing in lines of great endurance, like those half wild young women of the great frontier.

"And yet he will come for you."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because, as I have said, I know this, this Barent Creighton."

"Is he then so very—determined?" she questioned somewhat anxiously.

"He, he is very, very obstinate."

"He will find me more so," she declared. "He will find me not only obstinate but positively ugly, wilful, disobedient—a shrew—a vixen—a termagant!"

"But think of your father," I argued, "he is suffering!"

"Not half of what I suffered during the last few days," she affirmed. "Think of being sold, sir, like, like a fat turkey in a bag, sir, to, to a man I hate,—yes, positively hate!"

"Hate!" I cried. "And you have never known the fellow!"

"But I hate him all the more for that," she exclaimed, stamping her foot and clenching her hands. "No need to send such friends as you to intercede for him. Why didn't he come and court me like a man? He wouldn't buy a horse that way. Think of the shame of it, the disgrace of being literally sold in this day and age and in a free country, sir—sold in marriage to a total stranger just to suit my father's whim."

No longer could I trust myself to look at her, so I turned aside, to watch the cat's-paws and whirligigs racing across the sparkling lakelet whereon brave barks of brightly coloured leaves scuttled to and fro, like ancient galleons, loaded with the golden treasure of autumn, and manned, no doubt, by venturesome elves boldly voyaging on unknown seas.

Although I could not see Ronella, she being a bit behind me, and I durst not look her way, I knew that she was standing close by the shaggy bole of the ancient chestnut,

her firm, yet shapely, white hand upon the wrinkled and hoary bark, and I felt her bright brown eyes upon me wondering, no doubt, who in the world I might be and what business I had there. O'er tall and shapely was she in her close fitting dress, cut high in the waist and belted snugly below the swell of her rounded bosom. Of the Fall she was—an October maid if ever there was one!—with the warm sunlight of the harvest month a-sparkle in her eyes of deepest and darkest brown, the rioting tints of autumnal red in her rounded cheeks and arched lips, and all the glisten and sheen of the receding sun shimmering in the dark waves of her abundant hair.

"I think," I mused, "I think I shall take you straight home."

The only answer was a ripple of laughter, full of music and yet ringing with feminine willfulness and open rebellion.

"Because I do not think you are treating your father exactly right," I argued. "He is much worried—"

"He did not even ask my opinion in this, this matrimonial agreement—just simply told me what he had agreed to do. I had no voice, no choice, but to run away. But for those damned rebels—"

"Damned rebels?" I questioned.

"Yes," she cried angrily, "damned Anti-rent rebels—I would be out of reach by this time."

I stared out at the rippling lake where the sun turned the smooth surface into silver, and watched the fairy leaf-craft, full sails a-flutter, standing out to sea. Every now and then a fish broke the water, dashing sparkling drops into the air and causing circling ripples to run swiftly shoreward, only to spend their energy and die out to mirrored smoothness again.

"Still, it isn't hardly safe for you to roam around in the woods."

"I am safe enough," she answered slowly. "Behind that bit of forest is the old Manor house of the Creighton estate, the deserted and haunted home where my bought-and-paid-for husband is planning to take his most unwilling bride."

"Oh," said I.

"They will never think to look for me here and, besides, I am staying in that cabin with Mother Martha who is a witch."

"Ah," said I, "that is interesting; a witch?"

"Folk merely call her a witch because she is so wise. She has lived here unmolested since I can remember and we have been good friends for ever and ever so long."

"But your father," I protested.

"You may tell him that I am well and content."

"And that you will be home shortly," I suggested.

"That I will be home just as soon as that hateful marriage agreement expires—and not one minute before," she replied firmly. "And you might also suggest that if he dares to renew it that I will certainly stay away for ever."

"Perhaps if you but knew this—this Barent Creighton—" I began.

"I should only hate him the more," she cried in fine scorn, her brown eyes flashing. "I do not even want to see him—ever! He is a wretch, a scoundrel, I hate and revile him."

"Ah," said I, head bowed, as I worked the point of my walking stick into the ground at my feet.

"No man with a shred of honour would do such a contemptible thing, would be a party to such a crime. He is not fit for—for any one."

"Doubtless 't is true," I groaned, punching savagely at the hole I had made.

"I do not want to be married at all, sir, and certainly not to a fashionable young roue of New York—a knave—a money-mad, uncultured fool."

"A fool!" I nodded, my eyes still on the ground. "But, but it wasn't money that made him mad—rather the lack of it."

"He is a trickster, a cruel—"

"But, but really he isn't," I interrupted, very busy with my stick. "Indeed this, this Creighton isn't such a bad sort—in a way. And, and as a mere matter of justice, you should not judge him before the evidence is in for the defence."

"You certainly are a loyal friend of this bankrupt Creighton?"

"The best friend he has in the world," said I, working at the turf. "I have known him for a long, long time."

"And what has the defence to offer?" she asked doubtfully.

"Very little—I am afraid—except, Miss, except he is not entirely a knave, and neither is he bankrupt—yet."

"It is all one to me," she answered. "I will have none of him."

Under this severe arraignment I felt that if the little hole I was making in the earth would only open and swallow me out of sight I would be ever and ever so glad.

"He isn't such a bad looking fellow," I ventured.

"It makes no difference how he looks."

"Of a gentle and—er—forgiving disposition."

"He will need it if ever he has to endure my company."

"A little wild, perhaps."

"Trust me to tame him!"

"Knowing but little about women."

"He will learn something on that subject when I marry him."

"Ah, when you marry him!"

"When, indeed!" she laughed, "as likely I shall marry you, a total stranger."

"We have met before," I suggested.

"Once."

"And it does not seem to me at all unlikely or absurd that we shall marry."

"Indeed!"

"To save you again—from this embarrassing and unusual situation," I explained.

"I am honoured! Was ever maid so perplexed—to choose between marrying a man I have heard of but never seen, and one I see but whose name I have never even heard."

"You have heard it often enough of late." I bowed.

"Smith?" she guessed in derision. "However common it may be the very fact that I am asked to share it makes me curious."

My tongue almost refused to lend itself to speech and it was only with effort that I could stammer out:

"I—I am Barent Creighton!"

I heard the deep intake of her breath, saw her face grow suddenly pale, then dyed to blushing rosiness. So ashamed was I of what she must think of me that I turned hastily away toward the friendly wood to where the little twisting path wound its way toward the village by the Hudson.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GONE was the sunshine from the day and the sylvan beauty from the narrow, serpentine path which turned and twisted and undulated beneath the green wood, yet deep in my innermost sub-consciousness was a comforting feeling of relief that I had made a full confession to Ronella Hartwell. The wood was still and lonely and filled with evil shadows. Depressed and subdued, my head bowed, my stick beneath my arm and my hands behind my back, I hurried along the pathway through the sober and silent wood, thinking of the young woman I had left behind me and wondering, alas the day! what she must think of Barent Creighton.

As though mine anguish was visible to all, and perhaps it was, the little birds of the wood took fright and fled before me, chirping with alarm. The striped yellow chipmunks, cheek pouches bulging with beechnuts, whistled shrilly and dodged into their rocky caverns; the very leaves seemed to shrink from my presence, whispering their displeasure. And the tall firs shut out the sun so that the fearsome things of night seemed to follow, creeping, crawling, winging close behind so I durst not look around. So engrossed was I in this most bitter thought that I failed to hear the crackle of leaves and the snapping of twigs as a man slipped out of a hemlock coppice and stood in the pathway before me.

It was the lean and slouchy Bailiff.

"Ha! Ha!" said he.

"Ho! Ho!" said I.

"I've cotched ye red-handed—"

"Red headed," I corrected.

"Now don't—don't ye dare be funny with me, young feller," he cautioned, his long hands deep in the wide pockets of his old blue coat and his hard face thrust forward. "I'm th' Law, I be, and if ye get funny with me, sir, why, I'll clap th' gyves on ye quicker'n scat—blister me if I won't, sir!"

He drew down the corners of his hard mouth and fluttered his shaggy eyebrows up and down.

"Does it occur to your slow wits that it might be something of an undertaking to snap those gyves on me?" I answered, ripe for trouble, my heavy stick whistling merrily through the air.

"I'm th' Bailiff of this here Bailiwick, I be, absolutely," he proclaimed boastfully. "I'm th' High Sheriff, I be, elected by the people, an' I have a right, I have a perfect right to do what I have did, an' what I'm a-goin' to do, ab-so-lutely!" He shuffled closer. "I wants to know, sir, what you've been up to this mornin'."

"Oh, you do," I replied sharply. "Then suppose you go and find out, Mr. Bailiff."

"Ah, but I be a-goin' to find out; oh, yes I be!" he sneered, "an' right this very minute, instanter, if not sooner—blister me if I ain't!"

Here he suddenly withdrew a warty and not overclean hand from his sagging coat pocket and levelled an ancient, single barrelled pistol, of threatening aspect, straight at my head.

"Now," grinned he, "talk straight, an' prompt, Mr. Villun."

"Is it loaded?" I asked pleasantly.

"Loaded!" he snorted. "O' course it's loaded—for b'ar—ab-so-lutely! D' ye think I carry it 't cut my wisdom teeth on? Now, sir, ye black-hearted criminal, speak up prompt an' truthful like, or I'll let a streak o' daylight through ye wider'n a barn door. What have you been up to this mornin'?"

"Well, I will make a full and frank confession and throw myself on the mercy of the court. First I was up to breakfast."

"Now mind ye, no funny business, or I'll bore a hole through ye one kin throw a Dutch bible through," he warned. "I want to know just what criminal tricks you've been up to—"

"Don't you think you had better cock it?" I suggested, noting that he had not done so in his haste to get me covered.

"Er—r, perhaps I had," he stammered, bringing the hammer back to full cock with his huge thumb. "Now, sir—"

"Do you really think it would explode if you pulled the trigger?" I asked.

"Well," said he with due emphasis. "It might—an' then agin it might not, but I'd hate to take th' chance—with it pintoed at my gizzard—blister me if I wouldn't."

"The time has come when I must take long chances; suppose you try it," I suggested, looking straight into the muzzle. "Try it once—just for fun."

"Lord, but you're a cool duck!" he gasped, quite unnerved, as he lowered the shaking weapon and mopped the sweat from his forehead with a blue hanker. "Lord—God! Invited me to shoot him! You're a cool duck—ab-so-lutely!"

"You're scaring me half to death," said I.

And to show him how frightened I was I reached out and tweaked his big nose in no gentle manner.

"Taking advantage of my youth and timidity."

I knocked off his old wool hat.

"And if you don't want to try a shot just now you will oblige me by standing aside," I smiled, my heavy stick singing before me. "Otherwise I shall lay this staff over your head in a way you will long remember."

"Lord—God!" he exclaimed stepping hastily aside in the bushes, "such a cool 'un!"

"And should you feel the need of a little target practice, my good Mr. Bailiff, why, just blaze away at my rear coat buttons and good luck to you."

"Lord—as cool as a duck—ab-so-lutely!" he exclaimed, scouring his red face. "But I suppose criminals be all cool like a-that!"

I did not stop to argue the point further but whirled my staff merrily and pressed on my way through the timber at a smart pace without so much as looking around, leaving him standing there in the brush, mopping his red face and holding the useless pistol by his side. Neither did I bother to explain to the fellow, who was evidently unused to firearms, that the pistol flint had dropped out in his pocket, without his having noticed it, and that he could not shoot even if he would.

On the outskirts of the little village, some little distance from the tavern, old Jan Budge hailed me from the porch of his little cot and hobbled out in his blue stockinged feet to the white gate of the picket fence to speak to me.

"Stand by!" he cried.

"Good morning, Jan," I called, "aren't you a little late getting down street today?"

"Well, I don't know but I am, it got late so early this

mornin’,” he grinned as he fumbled in his coat for his tobacco box and helped himself to a generous chew. “I expect you’ve been lookin’ fer th’ maid o’ th’ manor whut wus lost last night?”

Here he tapped the ground with his cane and fluttered one little old eyelid most cunningly. “Ain’t it almighty funny how gals get lost like thet?”

“I wonder that you have not joined the searchers?” I parried with a question.

“Fools! Dolts! Crazy bedlams!” snorted Jan, fluttering his eyelid, and holding up a crooked finger very wisely. “A staunch ship with a good compass don’t get lost so easily in fair weather, sir, now do they?”

“They might,” said I very innocently. “But if you think you know where she is why don’t you go and find her?”

“Leave thet t’ th’ youngsters,” he chuckled. “I’m too old, far too old, Mr. Creighton, t’ be a-runnin’ arter young ladies or old ones either fer thet matter. I ride th’ water best, I do, t’ lea o’ th’ mole, sir. I’ve had my day on th’ blue water an’ my longest cruise now is from hum t’ *Big Nose* tavern.”

“Why do they called it *Big Nose* tavern, Jan?”

“It’s all ’cause o’ th’ pictoor.”

“But it is—or was—the picture of a man, Jan.”

“So it be,” said he, “an’ I guess I’m th’ only man alive what kin say his name, or remember it either! Oh, they’ve tried an’ tried t’ name this here tavern. It’s been th’ *Red Fox*, th’ *Bull’s Head*, th’ *General Putnam*, th’ *Red Indian* an’ Gawd only knows what else, ’cordin’ t’ th’ signs, but it’s never been called anything else but *Big Nose*.”

“Why *Big Nose*?”

" 'Cause th' feller whut built this here tavern, many an' many a long year ago, had sich a big nose."

"You said you knew his name, Jan."

"Th' only one in these here parts thet does know it, or kin say it either," said he proudly.

"The name, Jan!" I cried impatiently.

"Gijsbrecht Naaldwijk Oldenbarneveldt."

"Was his nose as long as his name, Jan?"

"Bigger," he nodded, "far bigger. But thet pictoor don't nowise do his nose justice, an' I've 'seen some big noses in my day, sailin' with your grandfather in th' Carrabeen, or maybe t' China or India, or some outlandish place. Many a time I've cut the old hook loose with th' carpenter's broad ax. I 'member once in th' Carra-been, three months cruise off Light o' Land, with a whaler runnin' fresh water, th' first luff ordered th' long boat hooked on th' falls when—"

"But, Jan—" I protested.

"An' oncet there wus a Spanish ship, sir, high an' dry in th' jungle, with a skeleton—yes sir, a skeleton!—a-hangin' in her rusty chains an' a great tree a-growin' right up through a big hole in her hull—"

"But what was it you were going to speak to me about, Jan?" I asked as he began to ramble.

"It's thet 'Bige Whittaker, th' bailiff," he whispered hoarsely, gazing anxiously about. "Ye wants t' be a-lookin' out fer thet feller, Mr. Creighton."

"I have just met him, Jan. Left him but a minute or two ago, up there in the wood, with a pistol in his hand."

"His pistol in his hand!" cried Jan, eyes a-goggle. "Oh, my goodness grief! Left th' Bailiff a-standin' there in th' wood with his pistol in his hand, an' jest 's I wus a-goin' t' warn y' t' look out fer thet feller."

"Thanks just the same, Jan."

"Mind yer course—he's a shadderin' ye," warned Jan. "He thinks as how ye were mixed up somehow in the Anti-rent business, he does. He ain't never arrested the right persons yet, nor caught no criminals nohow; that's why ye better be a-watchin' out."

"I shall watch him, Jan."

"Mind ye keep yer eye peeled," cautioned Jan. "Bige thinks he's a hell of a feller arter criminals an' highway booglers an' sich."

"Oh, he does," said I.

"An' ye better not let on ye know where the gal is," he grinned knowingly.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because her old dad 's a-tryin' his level best to marry her off to some rich nincompoop in New York, so I hears."

"Oh," said I.

"Yes, siree, some landlubber of a city feller—so ye better keep mum," said he. "Jest keep mum until it blows over, d' ye hear? She ran away to escape the marriage an' I don't blame her a mite. So ye keep mum—d' ye hear?"

"Mum's the word, Jan."

"Don't breathe it to a soul."

"I won't, Jan, because, because, oh, Jan, I am that city nincompoop from whom she ran away!"

"Oh, my goodness grief!" he gasped as I hurried down the village street to the tavern. "By the holy fidd—"

"Hav' somedings," greeted Tjereck as I entered the tap-room.

"A mug of cider, Tjereck," said I, very thirsty after my long walk; "but what is the excuse for the celebration?"

"Oof! I hav' find id a treasure." His heavy bass voice

boomed from the very bottom of his chest. "*Ja*, zuch a treasure as neffer vas—*Ach*, no neffer!"

"A treasure, Tjerck? What is it, gold?"

"*Ei! ei!* better yet dan dat, sir—so much betters dan dat!" his huge face was all one smile as he leaned over the polished bar to impart his secret. "I hav' finds id a perfect hired girls, *Ja!*"

"Ah, that must be a treasure indeed, Tjerck."

"I shoul't zay it vere!" he exclaimed. "Poof! An' zuch a treasure as she vas, Mr. Creighton—*hm!* zuch a vunderful treasure!"

"A handsome, rosy cheeked farmer's daughter—"

"*Goede God und hemel*, no!" he roared, "Vat you tink dis tavern vas, anyvay, a marriage business?"

"But you said she was a treasure, Tjerck."

"*Ja!*—und so she is, sir—a treasure vor me und nod vor dose young mens," he explained. "*Ach*, vat a rich find ov a *werkmaid* she vas, Mr. Creighton! Short, vith no more shapes dan an ice-shest, und freckled all offer th' features like a pan ov molasses cookies, Mr. Creighton. Und a liddle pinch ov a nose, und a mouth you couldt valk right in, und no chin at all,—none whateffer—choost a wrinkle—*Ach mijn God!*"

"She ought to stay with you a long, long time, Tjerck."

"Oh, it vill be shoost my luck dat she souldt die!" he groaned, horrified by the thought.

"Certainly she will never marry," I laughed.

"Haw! Haw! Hawwww," roared Tjerck. "I got it von now the boys von't carry off to marry mid dem. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

In the rear of the tavern was a long old-fashioned garden where gnarled and twisted lilacs grew side by side with bushy syringas in the green lawn. Where the red brick

walls were flanked on either side by long rows of sentinel hollyhocks and nodding yellow sunflowers. And behind them, as though guarded from itching fingers, were long beds of rich, purple heliotrope, scenting all the air with dainty perfume, and masses of brilliant phlox and fireweed, bordered with white bouncing-betty. And there was also a cozy bower, cleverly hidden around a turn in the walk behind a bunch of shrubbery, which was roofed and sided with a wonderful old grape vine pendant with ripening clusters of purple fruit. Beneath this green and purple arbour was a rustic seat, such as old men used to build out of curious knots and twisted saplings, that looked as though it had grown there quite by chance. And on this rustic bench, most wonderful to relate, was Martinus Hadsell, confirmed old bachelor, and the pretty Miss Zara Van Kleek. She was as fair as the noontide sun, was this daughter of the tavern keeper, all white and gold and rose, with pearly teeth and violet eyes and she was dimpling most prettily and smiling most enticingly up into the handsome dark eyes above her. And Martinus, brave knight! held her little soft white hand imprisoned in his tense fingers and whispered sentimental things, I make no doubt, into her eager ears.

I stepped hastily back for a new start, coughing loudly, a well recognized signal, and approached again, this time with less speed and more noise, and I found them at opposite ends of the seat, quite as I expected, their faces flushed a bit, their bright eyes sparkling.

"Barent!" cried Martinus at sight of me. "Wherever have you been?"

"Searching for the lost lady," I smiled, bowing before them.

"Oh, Zara!" exclaimed Martinus, remembering his man-

ners. "I want you to meet my good friend, Barent Creighton."

And Zara courtesied most prettily, favoured me with a smile and told me how pleased she was to meet me, as though a word from Martinus was recommendation enough for any one.

"And did you find the lady?" she asked.

"Most assuredly," I smiled.

"Love will ever find the way!" hummed Martinus.

"And in a surprisingly short time, in some cases," I retorted, at which they both blushed and looked the other way.

"Tell us about the lady," begged Zara.

So I must tell it all from the beginning, but very slow and guardedly, so as not to give a hint as to the location of Ronella's hiding place, nor forgetting the ludicrous incident of the mighty Bailiff and his worthless pistol. I had no more than finished telling of that worthy's discomfiture than we were startled by a rough voice booming behind us.

"Up with your hands."

In a flash we were up and whirled about, only to find ourselves confronted and confounded by the mighty Bailiff himself, with a new pistol waving before our eyes, and backed up by a motly array of deputies and curious villagers. On one side of the Bailiff stood a tow-headed, over-grown young man with a huge tower-of-London musket which he held levelled at my head. On the other side was a stout Dutch burgher, who shook like a jelly, despite the protection of a wide-mouthed brass blunderbuss which was sufficient to annihilate us all at a single discharge. The others were armed with a miscellaneous assortment of weapons, from pitch-forks to cleavers. They had sneaked

up over the velvety lawn without our knowing it and now held us at their mercy.

"You're wanted for highway boogery," began the Sheriff.

"Oh, are we?" said I.

"And for abducting Hartwell's darter."

"Anything else?" asked Martinus.

"And for Anti-rent rebels," added the Bailiff. "Here's th' warrants."

Our laughter died out when he produced two huge, red-sealed documents from his inside pocket and waved them before our eyes.

"Keep 'em covered, fellows," he warned. "They're a dashed cool lot—ab-so-lutely! Keep 'em where you've got 'em until I snap th' gyves on 'em."

A man shouldered his way through the crowd of villagers and it was none other than John Bevens.

"They are Anti-rent leaders!" he cried in his high pitched, sibilant voice.

"Ah! So it is you, John Bevens," I cried. "I might have known!"

"Arrest him!" cried Bevens. "Sing-Sing is the place for such rogues."

"We are not going to run away," I answered as calmly as I could. "This is a silly joke, John Bevens. You know that we are not Anti-renters."

"I know that you have abducted Miss Hartwell, and you shall tell us where she is, my fine fellow."

"Now my cool 'un," grinned the Bailiff as he brought forth his jingling handcuffs. "Now, my cool 'un, we'll jest snap these here ornaments on your wrists, an' no funny business either."

"Stop!" came a loud voice from behind the crowd.
"Stop, I say!"

There was a commotion as some one began to force a way to us.

"Stop, I say!"

John Bevens raised upon his toes to see who it was and instantly his smiling face went ghastly pale and ashen. He clapped a cambric hanker to his lips and with bowed shoulders hastened away down a side path behind a lilac bush and I saw him fairly run towards the stables.

The crowd opened and before us stood *The Badger*.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“**A**H-HA!” cried *The Badger*, transfixing the astonished Bailiff with his bright blue eyes. “Just in time I see, eh?”

The Bailiff shrank back before the fiery glance, muttering weak explanations, and the brave deputies lowered their weapons and stood open mouthed, awaiting instructions.

“But it was Mr. Bevens’ orders—”

“Bevens!” roared *The Badger*. “Where is he?” he searched the crowd with his eagle eyes, his wolf teeth bared.

The Bailiff ran anxiously about looking for John Bevens to back him up in the arrest but, of course, he could not find him.

“He was here just a minute ago,” panted the Bailiff.

“Mr. Creighton,” greeted *The Badger*, lifting his mangy beaver and bowing very nicely. “May I have the honour of conducting this case against you and your friend?”

“Inasmuch as you have made such a fair beginning,” I answered, “you may as well proceed—although the honour is very doubtful.”

“Leave it to *The Badger*,” he smiled knowingly. “These sorry rogues know me here, sir, and the Law, as I said before, is as full of holes as a skimmer—and you can trust *The Badger* to find the holes!”

“This is an outrage!” protested Martinus.

“We have committed no crime,” said I.

“No matter if you have, sir,” replied *The Badger* af-

fably. "Just leave it to me, that's all. I have practised here before, and you can trust me to settle this mighty quick."

"They're desperit Anti-rent rebels," maintained the Bailiff doggedly, shaking his long head. "They're cool an' desperate crooks—ab-so-lutely!"

"It's a mystery to me why you didn't hang them for witches," sneered *The Badger*.

"They held up the Hartwell coach," began the Bailiff.

"Held up tolderoll!" sniffed our counsel.

"They have abducted Hartwell's daughter."

"Abducted your grandmother!" cried *The Badger*.

"Here's a man to identify him!" cried the Bailiff, drawing Deacon Commings out of the crowd of spectators.

"Not more than half a man at the most," snorted *The Badger*.

"I can swear—" began the Deacon.

"No doubt of it at all," interrupted *The Badger*. "Most folk can and some of them with considerable originality and force, sir."

"I recognize—"

"If you recognize all your failings you must feel terribly ashamed," and *The Badger* waved him airily aside. "If you have anything of importance to say, which I seriously doubt, my young jackadandy, you can say it at the hearing. Forward at once to Squire Northrup's office, I will be responsible for the prisoners."

We filed away to the little law office of Squire Northrup which was quickly filled to overflowing by the curious villagers. The hearing was but a farce and *The Badger*, clever, witty, and well schooled in the crooks and turns of Police Court Law, fairly laughed the Bailiff and his case out of court. Without the chief witness against us, in the

person of John Bevens, who had influenced the Bailiff to make the arrest, the case fell flat and we went back to the tavern.

It was evident from this incident that Bevens meant to take advantage of every trivial thing to prevent me from acquiring title to my land so that I could not raise money to fight him until I was totally bankrupt and safely in gaol.

Though my little store of money was almost gone I opened the buckskin bag which Martinus had given me and took out a piece of gold which I slipped along the wet table to *The Badger* just as he set down his empty ale tankard.

"Ah, gold!" he exclaimed. "I did not know that there was any gold left in the world."

"There is but little," I sighed.

"But I have not earned this," he protested, ringing the yellow coin merrily on the hard oak.

"And our lasting gratitude besides," added Martinus, who was still scowling savagely and in a most villainous temper.

"No fear but that you have earned it," said I. "Without your help they might have caused us a great deal of trouble."

"I am more accustomed to smaller fees—ah, vastly smaller fees!" he smiled. "Now a shilling or two would be nearer the mark and this yellow piece is like to burn a hole in my pocket."

"Keep it," I begged, "and pray tell us how you chanced to arrive at such an opportune moment."

To my surprise *The Badger's* eyes narrowed into deeper flame and the lines in his thin face seemed to draw farther into the flesh. He caught at his frayed cravat with bony finger and swallowed hard.

"There is a man," he began in a low, harsh voice, staring with fixed eyes at the spilled ale on the table top, "a man I never let get far out of my sight. When he leaves the city, I leave. When he returns, I return. As far as he may ride on his fine horse just so far will I walk in my worn shoe leather. Always will he find me not far—oh, not far, watching and waiting!"

His voice became so low and hoarse it was difficult to follow him and he half arose from his chair, leaning over the table, his face drawn and white.

"And some sweet day I will sink my itching fingers in his soft, white throat. Some day I shall spring and strike him hard and drag him down, down, down into the mire at my feet. I will snatch from his greedy fingers his stolen wealth; strip him of his borrowed glory; dash the wreath of fame from his brow and the cup of happiness from his lips!"

He dropped his white head to the worn sleeve of his old blue coat and his gaunt frame shook with sobs. Drunk or crazed we knew not which and, despite this woeful lack of knowledge, there were tears in Martinus' dark eyes when he turned and seized the man by the arm.

"Come, my man," called Martinus. "We're all down on our luck today but the times will mend."

The Badger raised his thin face and smiled faintly as he shoved the bright gold piece towards me.

"I cannot take it," said he. "But if you wish to reward such poor service as mine there is something you can do."

"Name it," answered Martinus.

"It is granted already," I added.

"On your lands above here there is a little mountain lake—"

"Ah," I cried, straightening up with surprise. "Then you know!"

"I only know that there is a little old log cabin there," said he. "It was once a shooting lodge, erected by your ancestors, and now it is occupied by an old woman."

"Mother Martha," said I.

"By that name is she called, sir, and I only ask that she be allowed to live there in peace for a little longer."

I pushed the gold piece back across the table.

"Take it—slip it in your pocket, man. Mother Martha shall not be disturbed."

He twirled the bit of gold in his fingers and watched it as though fascinated.

"I wish, Mr. Creighton," he began earnestly, "I wish that you would let me take up this case of yours involving the steamboat rights of the Hudson."

"The brightest judges of the State have declared that we have no rights," said Martinus.

"And yet, I think that I could win," answered *The Badger*.

"We have no money for legal battles," said I. "Our resources are quite exhausted for the present."

"I ask nothing but the chance. Clothes do not make the man, and once I was as bright a corporation lawyer as ever handled a case. I have not forgotten the tricks of the trade, even though I be out at elbow and heel!"

"But you haven't the right to practise in the higher courts."

"A difficulty easily adjusted," he smiled. "There is a young attorney in the city, sir, one Horatio White, who sometimes shares his room and bed with me, and the two of us could manage the case, with no trouble at all and I am sure that we could win."

"The case is hopeless," I protested.

"No case is ever hopeless," he smiled. "*Audaces fortuna juvat*. It will do no harm to make another try."

The Badger was shrewd and clever, but why he should be so anxious to take up our hopeless legal battle I could not for the life of me see. The only solution was that he thought he could redeem himself at the bar and thus get back his license to practise in the higher courts. Anyhow, I reflected, there could be no harm in letting the fellow amuse himself with the case if he saw fit, even if he did no more than bother John Bevins or bleed him for a little blackmail.

"What say you, Martinus?" I asked. "Shall we engage *The Badger* and turn him loose to his fate?"

"Aye, let him go," nodded Martinus. "It will do no harm, even if no good comes of it."

"I am well used to long chances," smiled *The Badger*, and it was this smile, in the face of certain defeat, which decided me.

And while he voiced his thanks I called for a pot of ink and some paper and wrote a brief letter to Lawyer Zodic giving *The Badger* power to take up the hopeless case of our Steamboat Company against John Bevins, *et al.* I ordered Zodic to let *The Badger* inspect all the papers pertaining to the case which were stored in his strong box and told him to assist in any way he could.

While we were talking two parties of worn out searchers came stomping into the barroom, calling loudly for ale and cider. They were fagged out to a man, their faces red and grimed, their arms hanging limp with fatigue and their checkered shirts wet with sweat. They leaned their empty fowling pieces against the bar, dropped cow-bells and dinner horns noisily to the floor.

Evidently the search was over for the day, and, judging from the run of their brief conversation, they were all convinced that Miss Hartwell had made way with herself in the nearby river. Last of all to enter was the Lord of Oakwood, tired and worn, haggard and drawn, but ready to bribe the tired searchers to greater efforts.

"We'll beat the brake along the river," Hartwell called hoarsely. "We'll scour every inch of the country."

"'T ain't no use," answered one of the tired searchers. "She's gone—"

"Gone!" groaned Hartwell. "Drink up—have another. and we'll start—"

"She'll never be found," answered the fellow.

"Why, why, we'll find the lass, never fear."

"You'll find her in th' river!"

"Come on, everybody," cried Hartwell. "We'll beat the brake along the river. Two dollars for two hours more of searching. Come on, every one of you."

"It's a sight of money, but—"

He turned to the corner where the four regulars sat absorbed at their card game and, thinking to add new recruits, slapped one of them on the shoulder.

"Come on, sir, help me find my daughter and I will pay you handsomely for it. A hundred dollars to the man who finds her."

The fellow looked up from his card game in disgust.

"Wot! An' me with high-low-jack right here in my fist an' he just gives me one!"

"Come, sir—" began Hartwell.

"Play cards!" shouted the dealer who had just given one away.

"Spades trump—your lead," added his partner.

And without so much as looking at Hartwell they began

banging the cards down on the table and the play was resumed.

Noticing how haggard and worn Hartwell looked I made haste to make myself known.

"Your daughter is safe and sound, sir," I began.

"Mr. Creighton!" he gasped. "How—where—why—Dash my eye, sir!"

"Exactly," said I. "Twice, if you wish."

"But my lass?"

"She is safe and sound!"

"So it was you, eh—adding a bit of romance to your courtship—"

"I was a passenger in the coach that came up behind and frightened away the Anti-renters."

"And you rescued her!" cried Hartwell with delight. "Let me grasp your hand, sir! Rescued my daughter—my filly!"

"Hardly a rescue," I explained, drawing him out of earshot from the bar. "But we did succeed in driving away the murderous rascals before any real harm was done."

"And my lass was saved!"

"Not hurt a particle, I'm sure."

"And she wasn't abducted?"

"I can take oath to that, sir."

"But where is she—how came you here?" bellowed Hartwell. "I don't want sympathy, I want my lass!"

"But I saw and talked with her this morning, sir."

"Creighton!" he roared. "Where is she—quick, man!"

"Not so fast," said I. "She will return home safe and sound within a few days."

"She must come at once, sir!"

"That she will not," I interrupted. "She has spirit and determination—"

"Aye, that she has. Dash my eye, sir!"

"And she is dreadfully wrought up over this marriage agreement, Mr. Hartwell. She is determined not to come home until it has expired."

"Now by the Lord Harry, sir! She shall—"

"Not so fast," I cautioned. "It is just that spirit which keeps her away from home. Tear up that cursed contract, Hartwell, and take her back like a kind and loving father should, and you will find her the same gentle and lovable daughter as before."

"But I have given you my solemn word, sir!"

"From which I release you on the spot," said I. "I want none of it, sir, and only ask permission to woo and win her as a man should."

"Now, dash my eye! but that is the right spirit," he cried, handing me the contract and watching as I tore both copies to bits.

"It is the only way."

"Then tell my lass to come home, d' ye hear? Tell her to come home at once, this very day, sir,—and all will be forgiven and forgotten."

He turned to the searchers grouped beside the bar and striving mightily to overhear our conversation.

"Men," said he, more cheerfully. "The search is ended. My daughter is found, safe and well, thank God!"

He hurried to the door, spurs jingling, and the next minute I heard him galloping away up the street.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WITH light heart and buoyant step, fully in keeping with a morn of blue and gold and rosy pinkness, I hurried along the winding old woodland pathway towards the little mountain lake where Ronella Hartwell kept in hiding, to tell her that the fateful marriage agreement had been destroyed and that her father anxiously awaited her at home.

In certain sheltered nooks there was still a sparkle of white hoar frost on the faded grass and the sumacs and soft maples seemed to have suddenly burst into ruddy flame o'er night. As though this putting on of bright colours had suddenly become the fashionable rage in tree-
dom, all the leafy dwellers of the wood were making haste to don crimson and gold and dainty shades of yellow. And, because of this gaiety, the Quaker-like evergreens tossed their wide arms in high dudgeon at what they deemed a sinful and undignified display of gaudy finery.

The wood itself was wide awake and its shy creatures scurried over the rattling leaves at my approach, stopping to peer at me from the safe refuge of rock and tree. Woodpeckers tapped at hollow limbs, strange birds of the north, stopping to rest on their southern journey, called after me in weird voices. Noisy crows laughed and cock grouse drummed.

I hastened my steps when the bright sheen of the lake sparkled through the foliage and soon I came out upon the sloping meadow shore, with my heart fluttering mightily. but all to no purpose for Ronella was not there.

The water rippled merrily, whispering to the rocky shore and, where sheltered by the wood, its placid surface mirrored sky and hill and towering trees. The mighty chestnut waved its heavy arms in welcome. A black squirrel in the topmost branches, with red-tipped feathery tail arched over its back, chuckled and barked as though trying hard to tell me something of the utmost importance, but I was too disappointed to pay any attention. From the little log cabin farther down the shore, where a little bay put in and a noisy rivulet danced over the rocks, a thin wisp of bluish smoke twisted and curled above the wide chimney, evidencing that Mother Martha was at home and, witch or no witch, I was determined to find Ronella.

The stone steps were neatly scrubbed and the door stood wide open as though to welcome me inside. Through the open portal I caught a glimpse of a bright yellow floor and a clean hit-and-miss rag-carpet rug. A tip-up table was pushed to one side and a black cat was dozing comfortably in a cushioned rocker. When my eager knuckles resounded on the wooden door-post Mother Martha herself hobbled in from another room to greet me. She was old, oh, ever and ever so old! Somewhat bent with the weight of years and just a bit lame. But age was not evident in her kindly old face, for all its hollows and wrinkles. Bright, sparkling youth looked out of her faded eyes and sweet content and perfect peace, for all the world, seemed to be lurking like a shining nebula about her snow white locks. Her homespun garments were worn and oft mended but they were sweet and clean.

“What now, young sir—what now?” she called pleasantly, laughing and chuckling to herself as she limped towards the door. “Has the stock strayed or hast thy true love mittened thee? Ha, ha, ha, haa.”

"Neither, Mother Martha," quoth I, bowing over her hand. "And I have not come to have my fortune read."

"Ah!" she cried, shading her feeble old eyes from the morning sunlight with one trembling hand. "Ah, a Creighton, as I live! It's been years and years since I've seen that longish face and red hair. Ah, years and years, young sir, but I haven't forgotten them—Oh, I haven't forgotten them."

"A Creighton," I answered, "and the last of his line, Mother."

"A Creighton, yes, ha, ha, ha, haaa," she chuckled merrily. "A Creighton—ah, to be sure! But not the last—ah, not the last, young sir! Ha, ha, ha, haa."

And she laughed and chuckled in such a knowing way, for thus do old dames take liberties with speech, that I blushed and turned my burning face towards the lake.

"The manor house has been vacant for many and many a year, young sir."

"Ever since grandfather died."

"Died like a Creighton, young sir, with his boots on his feet and a smile on his lips."

"The Creightons rarely die in bed, Mother."

"Ah, what man wants to die in bed?" she answered. "It's better to go, if go ye must, down with a good ship. But have a care, young sir." She raised a warning forefinger as a true witch should. "Have a care of women, young sir, for young women beget rivals and rivals beget pistols and pistols beget death."

"Are you reading my future now, Mother?" I laughed.

"Aye, that I am, young sir," she retorted, "reading the future by remembering the past—which is the only way to read it. So beware of pistols. Ships will not hurt thee—wars will not disable thee—but beware of duels,

murderous duels. It was so thy father died, young sir, and so I say beware!"

"And will it be because of a woman, Mother?"

"Aye, yes, even a poor specimen of a witch could answer that. Are not women to blame for everything?"

"Women are—are everything, Mother."

"The one woman is everything—the rest are nothing, Ha, ha, ha, ha. They are the wisdom of the world—and as crazy as the moon; they are as strong as the tides,—and as weak as water itself; they are as heavy as lead, young sir,—and as light as thistle down; they are as constant as the sun—and as fickle as the summer showers; they are—they are just women, young sir."

"Aye, thank heaven, Mother!"

"Ah, Mother Martha knows, ha, ha, ha," she chuckled. "Although the art of fortune telling, young sir, depends entirely upon letting folk tell their own fortune through another's lips—because fortunes, to be interesting, must be of fine and pleasant things, else they will not believe. Who wants to hear of evil—who will pay for misery?"

"Then how do you know that I will be marrying soon?" I asked.

"Most men do, ha, ha, ha," she laughed. "Most men do, and especially so when they can marry five thousand acres and a handsome dowery at the same time, young sir."

"If ever I marry," said I, most sincerely, "it probably will not be for love—"

"It will be for love," she nodded. "Oh, soon wilt thou be a-marrying and move up to the stone manor house—then you will be wanting this old fishing shack, most like."

"I shall never want the fishing lodge, Mother, and if there is anything else—"

"Ah, that is quite enough, young sir, quite enough and I thank thee kindly. I have a son who provides the rest, young sir; ah, a poor unfortunate son, young sir, as ever a woman mothered!"

"Oh, Mother Martha!" I cried in sympathy.

"Kind and loving he is, young sir, and all that a man should be. But his mind has been injured with great wrongs and now his heart is filled with burning hate. Once he was well on his way to fame and fortune, then came a black, black day and a certain man—a friend—stripped him of fortune, home, wife—everything. He lived, but he never was the same. His mind has turned to burning flame and his heart to blackest hate. He walks the streets and the highways like a man crazed with drugs and starves and suffers that he may keep near the object of his hate, waiting and watching for his hour to strike."

"Time is always the best avenger."

"Nameless and alone he goes about his dangerous quest," she continued, her old eyes swimming. "He is but the shadow of his former self, but he is my son—oh, God, he is my son for a' that!"

"It will come out all right, Mother." I comforted.

"Hate is a disease, Worry a habit and Wrath a sin," she answered slowly.

"Disease can be cured, habits broken and sins forgiven, Mother."

"Ah, yes," she sighed, wiping her eyes. "Doubtless time will make it right."

"Assuredly it will, Mother."

"Content is always at the next stopping place along life's way."

"And what of love, Mother?" I asked eagerly.

"Ah, now, I know why thou didst come!" she cried.

"Then, oh, then please tell me where she is, Mother!"

"Sit thee down, young sir," she commanded, pulling a splint bottomed chair into the open doorway. "Sit thee down there if thou wouldst know the future, sit thee down and look steadily into this and thou shalt see—oh, thou shalt see!"

From the patchwork pocket which dangled at her waist Mother Martha produced a curious bit of spar-crystal, about the size of an egg, which had many sharp projections and glittering surfaces. And, most curious of all, within the very heart of this transparent stone there appeared to be a tiny sealed chamber in which was imprisoned a drop of yellow liquid which trembled and danced about like some mad thing seeking to escape. The crystal itself was of wonderful clearness, and, as I held it to the sunshine, making a cup of my hands, and gazed into its hollow depth, wherein the dancing bubble railed at confinement, mine eyes were fairly dazzled with a million scintillating rays of vivid purple light and glistening streams of brilliant red, fading quickly into blues, greens, yellows and into all the splendor of myriad rainbows. A trillion vari-coloured stars twinkled and glowed, great blazing suns whirled and careened madly in rainbow skies, where leaped sheets of dazzling, lambent flame. And behind all this the forked lightning streaked and played. I turned the crystal in my fingers and the kaleidoscopic lights of every imaginable colour flashed and glistened, shimmered and glimmered, with a fascinating and bewitching effect upon the mind, until everything else was blotted out of my vision and all sounds died away into absolute stillness.

I was not asleep, nor even drowsy, although I seemed to be totally unconscious of everything else but the hypnotic charm of the glistening crystal, while before my dazzled and

dream seeing eyes, out of the resplendent luminosity, arose a vapoury picture, which curled and twisted like a white fog in the chill grip of night, and gradually, gracefully shaped itself into Ronella Hartwell, sweet and beautiful, perfect in every line and detail. And the background of clouds slowly resolved itself until she seemed to be standing upon a high piece of land, amid dwarfed and stunted trees and shaggy, moss-grown rocks, and she was gazing off into a valley below where I could just make out a group of buildings nestling amid mighty oaks. And, as I sat spell-bound before this enchanted picture, a great longing seizing upon my heart, there came an uncouth black thing, like a creeping shadow up the mountainside. It skulked from bush to rock, from rock to tree, a monster stealing noiselessly, relentlessly upon her. Nor would this black phantom take shape, although I seemed to know that it was the Image of Destruction. With a startled cry I jumped up, the spell broken, and cast the cursed, devil-imprisoning stone upon the floor where it rolled and sparkled at Mother Martha's feet.

"What, what ails thee, man?" she exclaimed, seizing me by the arm. "What didst thou see in the stone?"

"Oh, Mother, tell me where she is—quick," I gasped. "Quick, or it may be too late!"

"She is safe, fear not!"

"Quick, I must be sure! Where is she?"

"Take the pathway behind the house," she directed. "Make haste, young sir, make haste up the path to the top of the hill and see that my Lamb is safe."

I waited to hear no more, so badly was I shaken by the terrible apparition, but ran from the cabin towards the foot of the hill only a little distance across the meadow. As I hurried along the cool breeze on my head cleared it

of the mad day-dream, my fears partially vanished when I recalled that it was quite impossible for any one to see the top of the hill from the cabin door, even in a bit of bewitched spar-crystal.

Somewhat slower I continued on my way until I came to a bend in the pathway and there I chanced upon John Bevens standing on a little hillock looking out o'er the placid Hudson to where a stately steamboat ploughed through the middle of the stream en route toward the city of New York, her decks crowded with passengers and her hull pulled far down in the water by a load of valuable freight. Flags fluttered from her mastheads and black wood smoke belched and rolled from her huge stacks.

Bevens turned about sharply at the first sound of my approach.

"Ah," said he, yawning behind his neatly gloved hand. "I don't suppose you are interested in steamboats, Mr. Creighton."

His beaver was given just a suggestion of a tilt to one side, a large white diamond seemed to wink at me from his neat cravat and his brown coat, with its rolled velvet collar, fitted snug and sleek. His thin face was exasperating in its clean shaven smugness. There was a bit of a smile lurking about the corners of his little mouth—a smile of contempt—and the sight maddened me.

"A most fortunate meeting!" cried I, noting that we were alone, as I threw aside my hat and staff and peeled off my coat. "Now I shall proceed to pay the first instalment on the huge debt I owe you!"

"Ah," he leered, "if you start to pay your debts, Creighton, you will be busy a long time, I fancy. Why not let this one go by default—like all the rest, eh?"

"This one I mean to satisfy in full, do y' hear!" I

growled, my face black with wrath and my eyes red with hate. "Now look out for yourself, John Bevens, for there is no one here to run for the constables and I shall proceed to give you the beating of your life."

"Not so fast!" he warned, smiling pleasantly. "Not so fast—I should hate to kill a fool."

I stopped abruptly before a fine new pistol which he deftly produced from his pocket and levelled at my head with a steady and deliberate hand.

"You spent candle!" he laughed. "It would be a waste of lead to snuff you out."

"I shall pay you yet, never fear," I warned hoarsely, "and with interest!"

"I shall not press the claim," he smiled over the pistol barrel. "Put on your coat, sir; you may catch your death and cheat the gaoler of his fee."

"Coward!" I raged. "You dare not meet me man to man and face to face!"

"Brutal and unclean way to settle an argument—only fit for stable boys and street gamins," he forced another yawn behind his hand. "Now there is a neater, better way—with pistols at forty paces!"

Then it suddenly occurred to me that Mother Martha, with witch-like foresight, had carefully warned me against this very thing.

"Some day I will catch you, John Bevens," I cried. "Some day you will not have time to flash that pretty pistol and then I shall crunch your bones in my hands and bruise your soft flesh to pulp beneath my knuckles, John Bevens."

"Some day!" he taunted. "Some day will come when tomorrow gets to be today."

"When I do catch you right I shall hammer you to jelly!"

"Then you better haste," he laughed harshly, "for you have but a few more days of liberty."

"I shall never rot behind the bars of a debtor's prison—not so long as the tide rips through Hell-Gate."

"That would be the better way to do it, y' know," he smiled. "They might even call you a gentleman after that—out of pity."

"They will dig more than one grave on that eventful day!"

"Ah, you threaten!"

"You can interpret it as such," I answered sullenly, as I donned my coat and picked up my hat and staff. "But rest assured that before I go you shall have preceded me into the Great Unknown by at least a few minutes."

His face went white and the hand holding the pistol trembled so that I had almost a notion to take a desperate chance and leap upon him, but just then he controlled himself with an effort and the chance was lost.

"I am not afraid," he grinned, over the pistol. "Others have made that same empty threat—and you know where they are today."

"Some of them are dead—murdered."

"Another word and I shall shoot you dead!"

"I will not die easily, like the others."

"You will die in gaol!"

"Be not too sure of victory; she is a fickle jade, upon occasion."

"My victory over you is as sure as the stars."

"Even the stars fall, John Bevens."

"You have not one chance in a thousand of escaping. Your rotting steamers will never ride the Hudson. Your last cent has gone—wasted in fighting those who were too clever for you—"

"Too crooked for me," I corrected.

"Your credit is exhausted and we have beaten you in every court in the State. There is not a chance,—not a ghostly shadow of a chance."

"There is yet one fang to draw."

"Ha, ha, ha, haaa," he laughed. "You mean that half starved garret rat, that slow-witted pettifogger, that Horatio White, with nothing but his new sheep-skin and his colossal nerve."

"David had but a sling, John Bevens."

"His knowledge of law is smaller than his purse and his bump of ignorance larger than his appetite. He will starve to death before the case is called on the calendar and he will be laughed out of court ere it is opened."

"A little stone has stopped many a big mill, John Bevens."

"He will fail," he answered. "Like all the rest, he will fail. There is nothing but defeat and death for all who dare to oppose John Bevens."

"I shall take my chance."

"You are unlucky," said he. "You are foredoomed ever to play a losing game—even in love."

"In love?" I questioned.

"So be good enough to hand over that marriage agreement before I blow it out of your pocket," he explained suavely. "I have promised to save Miss Hartwell from you—presumptuous fool!—even at the expense of marrying her myself."

I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I had torn the agreement up.

"Ah," said I. "'t is new to hear the devil talk of saving folk."

"She is the one woman in the world to share my wealth

and high estate—to be the queen of my kingdom of finance and luxury.”

“I warn you now that you will find me no mean rival.”

“If you want to enjoy your few days of life and liberty, you keep away from Oakwood Manor.”

“You talk bold enough—across the barrel of a pistol, John Bevens. But you dare not drop the weapon in the grass and repeat that last.”

“I am not a prize fighter.”

“No,—you have not climbed to that eminence.”

“Try me with pistols, like a gentleman, and you will not find me wanting.”

“I have no pistol, as you well know.”

He reached quickly into his pocket and brought forth a mate to the one he already held in his hand.

“Take that, sir, and—”

“And let you shoot me down in cold blood before I could either aim or fire,” I laughed. “I am not fool enough for that, John Bevens, and if you want to murder me you must do it without the protection of the duelling code. Even the presence of a friend did not save poor Bobbie De Groof from your murderous intent.”

“God!” the words rumbled in his throat. “God, I ought to kill you!”

Perhaps I might have taunted him to the point of doing so had not Elder Russell come bellowing upon us.

“Peace!” he cried, glaring at us savagely.

Bevens’ face became white with rage at this interruption. He wheeled upon the old fanatic but stepped hurriedly back before The Elder’s warning hand and voice.

“Only a few more days,” cautioned The Elder, “then the end!”

Superstitious as all gamblers are, John Bevens' mouth fell agap as though The Elder's warning was for him alone. Whereupon I laughed heartily and, still roaring, turned away to find Ronella Hartwell—leaving him standing there, biting his thin lips, pale of countenance, clenching the pistols behind his coat tails.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“**R**ONELLA!”

Three times did I call, in a voice vibrant with happiness at sight of her, drawing ever nearer, before she turned slowly, as though she could not believe her ears, and when she saw who it was she appeared to be startled.

“Nemesis!” she exclaimed. “If you must follow, can’t you keep farther in the background.”

“Did you not hear me calling, Ronella?” I asked eagerly.

“Oh, so it was you making all that noise,” scornfully.

A step or two and she stopped to look down at the purling water of a little brook wherein the gorgeous trout were mating on the dark gravel, while I stood there, grasping my beaver in tense fingers, staring after her, feeling very like an intruder. Dressed in pure and spotless white she was, of some soft and clinging texture, cunningly fashioned to show off to its best advantage every curve and line of her well-formed and symmetrical figure. Nor did this dress hide the poise of her splendid body, as some dresses do, but gave full value to her shapely shoulders, to the swelling lines of breast and hip. There was about her an atmosphere of sweet femininity and radiant beauty, of graceful ease and gentle frailness, and yet, somehow, these feminine endearments, so precious to masculine eyes, all combined, by the sorcery of woman, to make her appear all the more healthful and strong.

After a little she turned and looked at me and there was something of wonder in her troubled eyes.

"So you have not married your land?"

Her voice was low and full, most pleasing to the ear.

"No," said I, hoarsely. "Not yet."

"Is there no woman ready to take the venture, for a consideration?" she laughed softly. "Are there no maids bold enough?"

"Doubtless there are," I answered bitterly. "Some women will do most anything, for money."

"Ah," said she with great dignity, "I suppose you know!"

She walked a few paces up the brook, as though in deep thought, then slowly retraced her steps and stopped before me.

"Why did you come here today, Barent Creighton?" she demanded.

"To see you, Ronella," I answered simply.

"For that alone?"

"For that alone," I nodded. "And now that I know I am unwelcome I will bid you good-day."

"I have not said you are altogether unwelcome."

"But you did act it, Ronella."

"Merely to warn you that I shall not wed to give title to your acres, nor to please my father."

"And I have given my sacred promise," in mock seriousness, "under my hand and seal, to wed you within the fortnight!"

"The next time you bargain for a wife, Mr. Creighton, best be sure she is delivered on the spot, or else make her father give bonds for her appearance on the wedding day."

"The next time I bargain for a wife there will be no bargaining," I answered severely, with Irish wit.

"Doubtless you will ride up and drag her away by the hair."

"It would be the surer way," I owned. "'T is always best to meet trouble with a stout heart and a strong hand."

"Trouble, sir?"

"Marriage then," I smiled, "if you would call it by another name."

"Oh," said she, "is the idea then so hateful?"

"Repulsive," said I, to punish her, "disgusting and abhorrent."

With this there was silence for some little time, save for the swish-swish of the brown and broken grass about our feet. The woman by my side walked with bowed head, evidently thinking deeply.

"Your father," I began to explain, "in consideration of the news of your safety, happily released me from that marriage contract and I have torn the hateful document of our mutual unhappiness into little bits and burned them up."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Was it then, such a sorry bargain?"

"An abominable piece of business, but there was some little excuse for my rude action, noisome to both of us though it was."

"Oh, so you didn't want to marry me?" Her chin tilted a bit higher.

"Not in the least," I owned, "or any one else."

"Were your affairs then so very desperate?" she asked anxiously.

"As desperate as well could be."

"So that you would have married—any one—for money?"

"Any one!" I nodded.

"Then you will have to marry some one?"

"Very probably."

"Is, is there no, no other way?"

"There is this Manor farm, and that is all."

"Ah," said she, blushing prettily. "Yes, the land—to be sure!"

"All I need is a wife and a bit of legal paper to make it mine."

"Doubtless it will be harder to get the bit of paper," she laughed.

"Possibly," I nodded.

"Ah, pity 't is that wives are so cheap!"

"And yet, strange paradox, they are always dear—"

"You can easily find some woman to, to marry you—out of hand."

"I feel myself growing more particular, and harder to please!"

"And when you are married, and the land deeded over to you, then you can pay up all your debts."

"Pay some of them," I corrected; "just those which are most threatening. But even that, I fear, would be but postponing the day of reckoning. To succeed we must break that steamboat monopoly and teach one John Bevens and his mercenary bandits that such highhanded methods are obsolete in this day and age and in a new republic."

"You do speak passionately! I have found Mr. Bevens very good company."

"A counterfeit coin is good—until some one detects the fraud."

"I understand that Mr. Bevens is a great financier," she answered slowly. "One of the richest and most prominent young men of the great city."

"He is prominent in more ways than one. He is rich, for the time being. And he is, just now, gloating a bit too soon of my failure as a business rival," I continued as we

strolled along. "I shall marry my acres and fight him to the last copper of my resources."

A gentle little breeze, full of fun and caprice, came romping o'er the brown meadows and stopped to play with the curls about her white neck, bringing a brighter sparkle to her dark eyes and a deeper, richer colour to her rosy cheeks. Her rounded lips of cherry were parted ever so little, as the last spoken word had left them, the flicker of a smile lurking in the shadowy corners of her arched mouth, displaying the glint of perfect teeth.

"Thy face is like the pink and white wax-flowers of new May, Ronella," I began, very boldly.

"Alas, that flowers should fade so soon!"

I laid my trembling fingers gently upon her soft white arm and felt its magical warmth and subtle life tingle through my being.

"And thine eyes are like the soft and dusky beauty of summer night, Ronella."

"And my temper is quick and snappy, like summer heat lightning. And I am wilful, rebellious and disobedient."

"And most beautiful, withal," I added.

"Please save your flattering pleasantries for the New York maids. Doubtless they sounded very brave and rhetorical when first you whispered them, but that was ever and ever so long ago, Mr. Creighton."

She laughed soft and musically, and beneath her questioning gaze I flushed and stammered like a country bumpkin.

"I dare say that they are not altogether new to you," I ventured.

"Oh," said she, blushing very prettily. "As for that, all men are a great deal alike in their foolishness."

A wave of furious jealousy swept me, for the very hint

that others had dared to talk to her of love set my heart to pounding wildly and my blood to running hot. And before my eyes, for some unknown reason, came a vision of John Bevins, well schooled in the art of love making, as many an unhappy woman could testify, with his little eyes upon Ronella and his sensuous hands upon her arms.

She was standing so close that when she turned and looked at me I seemed to be caught in the magnetic aura of her personality and drawn toward her as irresistibly as steel to magnet. My arm, trembling with strength and new daring, found its way across her wide shoulders, drawing her even closer, her full, moist lips almost on a level with my own.

"You wouldn't dare!" she challenged.

Her voice was low and calm, yet vibrant with feeling; her dark eyes were narrowed to ebony slits and her chin was thrust defiantly upward. I looked deep in those narrowed eyes, I felt her strong muscles gather beneath my arm, and I knew that she had no fear.

"It is not because I do not dare," said I releasing her. "Nor yet because I lack the strength."

She laughed in my very face, but not, I was certain, to lure me on. I stepped quickly back and away from her, away from the power of her, and stood, with folded arms, my back toward temptation.

"I do not want that kind—any more than I desire to purchase a wife with a few acres of land."

"I am neither prude nor puritan," said she, behind my back, "only, only—"

"Only?" said I.

"Only," she finished, "I will not have affection forced upon me."

"Quite right," I agreed. "Only, only—"

"Only?" mimicked she.

"Only at times you are quite irresistible and, and—"

"And?" said she.

"And at such times a man might easily be deceived into believing that very little force would be necessary."

She but laughed at my gravity, ruffling up my red hair and petting me playfully on the shoulder.

"You can be very nice—" began she.

"With the greatest difficulty in your presence," I interrupted.

"... and vastly different from most men," she finished.

"Perhaps in being a greater fool."

A great flock of blue and bronze passenger pigeons dropped down out of the sky, with a mighty whistling of wings, into the wheat stubble in the field beyond. Like a blue wave they quickly swept entirely across the field, as those in the rear continually fluttered over the others for the best picking just ahead. There was a great beating of strong wings, the soft calls of the gentle birds and then the multitude had rolled clear across the yellow field and mounted into the air to seek another feeding ground.

"I must go back to Mother Martha," she sighed.

Side by side we walked back to the little cabin, sober and quiet as an aged couple on their way to church of a Sunday morning.

"You must return to your father," said I, as we came to the open doorway.

"Tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AND now that Ronella had returned home my booted feet scarce could rest until they hurried me thither.

So many times, of late, the jesting Fates had made merry with my future I might have guessed the welcome I was to receive at Oakwood. There was a path, a mere shadow of a path, from the cabin by the lake across the fields and through the forest to Oakwood. Here a noisy little brook divided the two estates, the pathway crossing the stream on a high arched bridge of stone.

With joyous expectation I stepped on Oakwood for the first, my eyes searching through the trees for some sign of Ronella Hartwell. The big Manor house, mothering a great brood of outbuildings, was all but hidden in a grove of heavy bodied oaks. Cattle and sheep were in the fields, horses in the paddock, fowls about the buildings. A quiet, peaceful pastoral, yet for some unknown reason I became as slow and timid, as anxious and fearful, as a country clod-hopper at his first call on a kitchen wench.

I know not, nor do I pretend to question, the full meaning of this unknown force that reaches across continents and seas, that binds stronger than the strongest chains, more powerful than laws, more potent than all other emotions. I know only that all my financial troubles and fears for the future were quite forgotten in the conquest of this woman; that an irresistible something drew me to her; that I desired her presence more than all the demands ever born of habit. That, thinking of her, I forgot failure,

the gaol threatening, the ruin staring me in the face. I wanted her more than wealth, more than success, more than life, more than aught else besides.

At this tense moment the Fates brought me crashing down to earth as a gruff voice roared out behind me.

"Get off my land—dash m' eye, what impudence!"

A rattle of hoofs on the gravel road and the Lord of Oakwood and John Bevens rode up.

"Get out—get off!" roared Hartwell, his face puffed red with blood. "I'll sue you for trespass! I'll set the hounds on you—"

"Why, Mr. Hartwell—" I began in amazement.

"Off my land, sirrah! A fine trick you thought to play on me—you and that old fossil of a Zodoc. Dash my eye, yes! My money for your worthless steamboats—my lass and my money at the same time, eh?"

"Oh, a rare mate for thy filly, dash my eye!" I laughed.

"Black Dan! Coochie! Smoke!" he roared. "Call the field hands, John, and have them throw this scoundrel off the place."

"You ever smell of a horse," said I, "but your manners are those of a jackass."

"Give me a pistol, John—" he roared.

"Don't," said I, "fools should not be trusted with firearms."

Bevens seized the frantic man by the arm.

"Let be!" cried Hartwell, "I'll settle with this damned pauper, this worthless vagabond, this red headed—"

"Fire and spirit, dash my eye, sir," I quoted.

"I'll rub your nose—"

"Strength and stamina there, sir."

These taunts drove my lord of Oakwood into a violent

fit of anger, his voice failing him, his face black with passion.

I addressed myself to Bevens.

"This, added to what I already owe you, Mr. Bevens,—"

"Ah, you owe so much," he smiled.

"Some of which I expect to pay," I warned, "and soon!"

"Your expectations never attain realization," said he. "I drove you out of New York—"

"And away from Oakwood," I added.

"Yes," he nodded, "and I shall not call the job completed until you are safely in hell."

I verily believe had I lingered there my lord of Oakwood would have fallen from his horse in a stroke. I caught a glimpse of Ronella near the house, attracted by her father's bellowing. It was but a step across the stone bridge to my own land, and there I seated myself on the stone work and leisurely filled my pipe.

"As trustee of Creighton Manor,"—puff-puff—said I. "I shall sit here,"—puff-puff—"and I choose, 'til you learn," puff-puff, "to love this pauper," puff-puff, "this red-headed vagabond, as a—ah—son-in-law!"

Long after they had ridden on, Hartwell roaring and cursing, Bevens smiling with satisfaction at my discomfiture I sat there musing bitterly. I need hardly say that Hartwell's antagonism made me all the more determined to win his daughter if such a thing were possible.

Then, knocking out my third pipe, I walked slowly back to consult the family witch.

"Mother Martha," followed with a mighty sigh. "Please let me look at the spar-crystal."

"Oh, ha, ha, haaaa, young sir," she laughed. "I'm afraid the crystal will do thee little good, for all signs fail,

thou knowest, in a drought and when love runs at sixes and sevens, ha, ha, ha, haaaa!"

Nevertheless she hobbled out and thrust the spar-crystal into my eager hands.

"Love is a knot which no man can untangle, young sir," laughed Mother Martha, "but if left alone for a little time it unravels itself—ho, ho, hooo."

"Youth is ever an impatient fellow," I sighed.

Though the friendly spirit imprisoned within the spar-crystal kindled its brightest fires of warmest red and deepest blue, of emerald glint and violet sheen, of ruddy orange and golden yellow; though a thousand dazzling rays of every hue and tint reflected and refracted until my eyes were dazzled and blinded, still the future did not open.

"Ronella!" I whispered. "Fair Ronella!"

I gazed and gazed, but still before my eyes remained the Present and not the Future. Still the wind-whipped waves dashed madly against the rocky shore; still the sullen grey clouds scuttled above the bending spruce tops; still I saw before me the unchanging panorama of swaying wood and barren hill, of tossing water and brown meadow, and the Future would not ope. I cast the transparent stone from me in disgust and thrust my hands in my pockets, sliding down in the splint chair until my chin rested fairly on my stock.

"Ah-ha! be not angry with the stone, young sir," cried Mother Martha, and I hastened to recover the precious witch-stone for her, muttering my apologies. "One cannot read the future of love, young sir, not even in the stone, for no one knows what love will do—not even love itself."

"Mother, you are a witch with words and wisdom, if nothing else."

"Witchcraft is mostly knowledge," she chuckled. "Ah,

but the times folk come here to have me tell them the things they ought to know themselves."

"And love is the most mysterious of all," I sighed.

"And the easiest of all to understand, young sir," she smiled knowingly, "if one but let it have its own way."

"And yet love doth make many cowards, Mother."

"And many fools!" she laughed. "Ho, ho, hoooo!"

"But, Mother," I protested. "What am I to do when I am refused even a sight of her?"

"Do? Ha, ha, haa!" she chuckled. "What do they usually do? Why, they sees them,—that's thy answer, young sir."

"But how—where?"

"How? Where, young sir? As for that, I will leave it entirely to thyself."

"To me!" I exclaimed. "But, Mother, I came to you for advice and counsel."

"And thou hast had both, young sir, for if one cannot go to Oakwood they can, at least, come here."

"Come here!" I cried.

"For counsel and advice—the same as Miss Ronella."

It dawned upon me suddenly that the good soul was hinting that most any day now I was like to find Ronella visiting at the cabin and I sprang up with an exclamation of delight and seized her withered old hands in both of mine.

"Mother Martha! You are not only a witch—you are a priceless treasure."

"Tut, tut, young sir," she nodded and smiled, though greatly pleased. "I can promise thee nothing."

"Tell me, is she most apt to come in the morning or the afternoon?"

"How should I know? Away with such a foolish ques-

tion! But remember, young sir, that the mornings are apt to be chill now. Oh, they are very apt to be chill and wet just now, ha, ha, ha, haaaa!"

The day was already late, and a stormy one at that, so I hurried back through the wood to the village along the river, being greatly cheered and patient for what the morrow might bring forth.

Once more Jan Budge came hobbling out to his gate and stopped me.

"Ahoy, Mister Creighton," he hailed, "back yer mains'l an' heave to."

"Aye, aye, Jan."

"I seen somethin' t' day, Mr. Creighton," he began anxiously. "Dash m' deadlights if I didn't, an' mighty suspicious too!"

"What did you see, Jan?"

He looked cautiously all around to see that no one was listening.

"I seen th' Bailiff, 'Bige Whittaker, a-talkin' with John Bevens, sir."

"And what of that, Jan?"

"What o' that, indeed!" he cried. "Ain't them two pirates an' press-gangsters, conflagbin' an' a-plottin', evidence enough t' hang a dog?"

"Perhaps it is, Jan," I admitted. "But—"

"Mind ye, I ain't a-carryin' o' no tales," he cautioned. "Maybe their papers be all right an' regular. All I got t' say is—look ye out, Mr. Creighton. Keep clear fer action an' a good eye aloft, I say!"

"Thanks, Jan," I smiled. "I shall look out, as you say."

"An' if I spots anything more I'll break out a signal,"

he answered. "Neither o' them fellers is t' be trusted, not a bit, sir; no further than ye could fling a bull by th' tail. Ye can't put no more 'pendence on what they say than th' spit out 'r their mouths. An' 'Bige Whittaker is a-goin' ter arrest some one a-fore his term expires if he has t' arrest himself."

"But I haven't given full rein to my criminal nature yet, Jan."

"Hark ye, Mr. Creighton, they're fixin' t' get ye fer these wild Anti-rent doin's, they be."

"But they were not my doings, Jan."

"Keep clear fer action, boy; keep stripped fer action!" he warned. "Clew me down, but there's a bad storm comin'—a regular ty-ra-phoon! Take it cool like yer granddaddy, an' remember he always crowded sail an' double shotted his guns when we raised a strange hull or a new headland. Oh, what a bully-boy he wus, wus Captain Creighton, with a yearnin' fer hidden coves an' atoll an' coral islands an' copper-coloured Injuns. I mind oncet we wus ridin' in as tidy a little harbour 's ever wus, when something hummed by m' ear—a pizen arrer. Yes, sir, a pizen arrer! No more'n six inches long, sir, like a knittin' needle, with a dab o' cotton on one end an' death on th' other. A-stickin' there in th' main-mast within an inch o' my ear!"

"Close enough, Jan."

"St. Anthony's fire, yes! But we raked th' jungle with grape an' canister an' went over th' side with cutlasses an' pistols—that wus yer granddaddy's way, Mr. Creighton—grape and canister, cutlasses an' pistols—up an' at 'em, boys! So I warns ye, clear fer action!"

"I am ready, Jan."

"An' oncet there wus a Spanish ship, a big hulk o' an' old Spaniard, a ridin' high an' dry in th' jungle with a skeleton a-hangin' in her rusty old chains—"

"It must have been a wonderful adventure, Jan," said I, well knowing the danger of the Spanish ship.

"It were," said he. "It certainly were."

Giving me a parting warning to look out for the Bailiff, the old salt shuffled back to his arm chair on the porch and his newspaper and I joined Martinus at the tavern.

The mellow blare of a trumpet rose and fell below the village. The silvery, heart-stirring notes echoed and reverberated from hill to hill and came whispering back from the broad river. With the first echo-waking notes the stable doors opened with a crash and amid a clatter of hoofs on the barn floor, the jingle of harness and buckles, four horses were brought out into the yard just as the Albany stage swung down the village street. The four tired horses were unhitched in a trice and went trotting into the barn of their own accord, while the driver regaled himself with a stiff drink of toddy and shouted the brief news from down the river.

"Another bloody mass-a-cree on th' Missouri," he gulped noisily at his toddy. "Si-ox Injuns wipe out emigrant train—kill an' scalp forty—includin' Col. Harry Brisbell of Otsego." He gulped again and drew in a hissing breath. "Henry Clay is 'n favour of a joint resolution to annex th' Republic of Texas"—gulp—gulp—gulp—"General William DeLong shot in a bloody duel by Col. Walter Seeley at Washington—deader'n a mackerel—woman,—"
more hot toddy—"Th' New Englanders want 'nother state—can't have it—" gulp—"Mexico threatens to come up an' lick us—" gulp—"won't come—" gulp—"can't lick us."

A passenger or two took their places inside, the mail bags were strapped on the boot and with a few sharp commands the driver scrambled into place, gathering up the four reins.

"Right-o!"

"All right!" echoed the stable boys.

"Gaddab! Giddab!"

The long whip crackled like a pistol, the four nervous beasts sprang into the collars and, with a jerk and a lurching on its leathern straps, the great coach rolled noisily away, dust and dirt flying, only to slow down to a plodding walk once outside of the village.

"Come inside, Barent," suggested Martinus, "and we will try and think of some way to circumvent that monumental rascal—John Bevens."

"Ah, were you speaking of me?" asked a high pitched, though courteous voice behind us.

I whirled about to find John Bevens standing there with just a flicker of a contemptuous smile upon his thin lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"DID I hear my name mentioned?" asked John Bevens, very politely, in his peculiar, sibilant voice, a voice which flowed pleasing enough when cool and calm but which broke and squeaked when raised in excitement.

He stood there very nonchalantly, one carefully gloved, long fingered hand upon a slender hip, head up-tilted in a haughty way, a faint smile upon his thin lips, his eyes carefully narrowed. He was newly barbered and his side whiskers were neatly brushed against thin, powdered cheeks.

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" he repeated, his rasping voice carrying a distinct challenge and thus betraying his inner feelings.

"We have increased our profane vocabulary by adopting it," answered Martinus very tartly.

"Ah!" smiled Bevens.

"And when an extremely ugly word is needed," I added, "why, John Bevens answers very well indeed."

"It is a name not unfamiliar in New York, I trust," he replied indifferently.

"Familiar enough for its evil," said I.

"Whereas the name of Barent Creighton is synonymous with failure and bankruptcy."

"Thanks to you," I finished.

"Thanks to me," he nodded, smiling.

"We have not yet failed," said I, "and so we are not quite bankrupt."

"You boasted once that you would run your steamboats

upon the Hudson," he continued maliciously, "and they are still at their docks in Jersey—ah, very still indeed."

"They will not be inactive long," I smiled bravely.

"Do you think that garret rat of a Horatio White, and whoever is behind the brainless shyster, can successfully oppose the greatest legal minds in New York?"

"With all your gold you cannot corrupt Horatio White; with all your evil influence and political intrigue you cannot influence or coerce the United States Supreme Court, and you are afraid, John Bevens, you are afraid."

"Afraid!" he squeaked angrily.

"You know that you will lose, John Bevens."

"I shall win—there are ways and ways, and still other ways."

"My God!" cried Martinus in a hoarse voice, unable to contain himself longer. "Must we stand here like pious Quakers and listen to his stinging taunts?"

"Martinus!" I cautioned.

"Let me at him, Barent!"

I seized my hot-tempered friend just in time and pushed him back to a safe distance.

"Martinus," I whispered. "Be careful, man. He has a pistol and would like nothing better than to use it."

"Stand aside, Barent!"

"No, no, Martinus," I answered, "be cool, man."

I noticed that Bevens was not so anxious to pick a quarrel with Martinus as he was with me. He let Martinus' rage pass unnoticed and the reason was very obvious. He knew that Martinus was an expert with the army saber and to challenge him to mortal combat would mean a duel with sabers, which was not at all to Bevens' liking.

"We will not stay to listen to you," I answered as coolly as I could, still wrestling with Martinus.

"Barent!" cried Martinus.

"Martinus, this is my quarrel," I answered sternly. "You will do well to let me settle it my own way."

"Do not be afraid," sneered Bevens.

"I'll show you who is afraid, John Bevens!" I exclaimed as I wheeled upon him with clenched fists.

A pistol flashed from his pocket and was levelled at my head.

"A step farther and I will let you have it!"

"Coward!" I cried. "You do not dare to fight!"

"To fight, yes,"—little eyes narrowed to angry slits, close beside his beaked nose,—"but not like barroom bullies. I'll fight you, damn you! here and now, with pistols, like a gentleman."

"I am unarmed and you know it, John Bevens."

Again he brought forth the duplicate pistol and held the weapons out to me.

"Take your choice, sir, and we will have it out here and now; take one of these and we will see who is the better man!"

Our voices had been rising higher and higher until these last few sentences were fairly shouted at each other. The noise of our quarrel reached the ears of those within the tavern and the taproom quickly emptied its human contents into the yard, the men rushing to more favourable points of vantage the better to witness the threatening combat. Tjerck himself waddled out to see what was going on, screwing up his little eyes and pursing his thick lips, having no aversion to the letting of blood so long as it was outside his door.

Walks and roads echoed with the patter of flying feet as men and boys came running to the spot. Across the

street doors opened and windows were raised as the women folk peered out, seeming to know instinctively that scandal threatened the quietude of the village. Men left their shops, left the forge and the bench and the store, and soon we were quite ringed about with men pressing eagerly forward, hands clenched, mouths agap, waiting for things to happen.

Not that I was afraid of him—not that I did not want to fight, for the hot Creighton blood was already surging in my throat—not for fear or cowardice did I step back from the pistols he offered. I knew, as he must have known, that it was all most unfair, because the advantage of such a meeting all lay with him, crack shot and expert duelist that he was.

I stood there like a man in a trance, holding Martinus by the arm, staring down at the pistols, and those who saw me must have thought that I was stricken dumb and weak by sudden fear. “We’ll see who is the better man!” rang through my hot brain again and again, swinging like a verbal pendulum, like the lilt of some old song. “We’ll see who is the better man—the better man—the better man!” Pistols at forty yards—how could that prove who was the better man? And back the answer flashed that it would but prove who was the quicker of hand, the better shot, who valued human life the least—and that was all. Why not bare knuckles, man to man, if this question of physical superiority was at stake?

I shook myself from this stupor to answer him, meaning to explain that we would fight it out, man to man, with bare knuckles.

“I will not fight—” I began very slowly and calmly.

Before I could add “with pistols,” Bevens dropped the

weapons into his pocket and sprang forward, striking me across the cheek with his open hand so that the blow rang like the crack of a whip.

"Now will you fight!" he screamed, glaring at me.

"No—not now!" I answered slowly, and in a voice strange to my ear, my cheek burning where his fingers had marked me. "Later we will settle this, John Bevens, and I hope to your complete satisfaction."

"Now, by God!" roared Martinus, struggling in my arms.

"Martinus!" I called, "this is no time or place."

"No man can strike a friend of mine and not pay for it!"

"I will take care of this, Martinus," I answered.

"Let me at him, Barent! Only let me shoot the dog as he deserves!"

With difficulty I waved the crowd aside and led Martinus to the tavern, roaring and threatening with every breath, and struggling to get away from me so that he could annihilate John Bevens. And, as we passed, the villagers, disgusted because no fight had ensued, no blood been let, freely passed their varying opinions.

"Ah, there's th' game-cock fer ye," said one of Martinus.

"All fuss an' feathers," answered the burly butcher.

"Th' cool'n would stand th' gaff better."

"Th' black cock has th' fightin' blood."

"Hot blood cools quickest."

"An' spiles many a good bird."

And as we stumbled up the darkened stairway to our room the shrill, rasping of Old Jot rang in my ears.

"What y' got t' say now, Jan Budge? What y' got t' say now, I asks?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I HAD been publicly slapped in the face by my bitterest enemy.

This, in itself, constituted the most deadly of insults and, in that hot-blooded day and age, could be wiped out with nothing less than red blood itself. A cold sweat broke out upon my brow as I fought back the terrible anger which possessed me and strove mightily to be cool. I knew that I must challenge John Bevens to mortal combat, as he expected, and as the code demanded. But there was within me an unchained beast which would not be stilled and which cried out in a loud voice for me to cast aside such foolish moral obligations and to beat the insulting scoundrel with my naked fists as his conduct merited.

The little dormer room was too small to hold me and my troubles, so, leaving Martinus face downward on the bed, where he was wrestling with his temper, I stole out and hurried away toward the river bank below the town.

That I must fight John Bevens and not later than the following morning, I knew for a certainty, and the knowledge brought no sense of fear, but rather a comforting exultation and a certain satisfaction that now I could repay my debt in full. I knew that I was in perfect health, physically strong, and I felt sure that even if he did fire first I could withstand the impact of a bullet long enough to place a bit of lead where probing would be quite useless and unnecessary.

It was just getting dusk when I left the broad river, and turned my face toward the tavern so that I could set my tumbling house in order and make arrangements for the

duel on the morrow. I was cool and calm, now that I knew it was to take place, and even found some grim satisfaction in the knowledge that I might soon escape a deal of worry and trouble if John Bevens placed his bullet through my breast as he was like to do.

I came suddenly around a thicket grown up about an old stone pile and at a little distance away I saw before me a group of men. At first I did not sense why they stood there so motionless, then, with a gasp, I realized that two of these men, in their shirt sleeves, stood facing one another a few yards apart, their right arms outstretched. A third individual held on high a fluttering white handkerchief. In a flash I saw it all and recognized the man standing with his back towards me as my good friend Martinus—and he was facing John Bevens in my behalf!

“Martinus!” I cried in horror, “Martinus!”

I ran forward, waving my arms and shouting.

“Martinus!”

My hoarse cries reached his ears and Martinus turned slightly. Just then the fatal square of white fell and with its first downward motion there came a flash from Bevens’ pistol, followed by a little puff of bluish smoke. Martinus seemed to pitch forward and down, his pistol exploding in the air, but he fell with his face towards me, and lay motionless in the dead leaves and withered grass.

“Martinus!” I sobbed and my voice was but a whisper.

It seemed ages before I could reach his side, although it was a matter of seconds, and when I gently had turned him over on his back his face was white as death itself. He made no sound, nor was there any sign of life. On the right breast of his embroidered waistcoat was a dark red stain that welled larger and ever larger, redder and ever redder, even as I looked.

"Martinus!" I cried, but there was no answer. "Martinus!"

Some one spoke to me but I could not understand. Others were about me but I could not see them for the mist in my eyes. There lay the body of my best friend, who sought to save me from a duel in which he knew I had little show, shot by my bitterest enemy! With trembling, shaking fingers I tore frantically at the buttons, fairly tearing the bloodsoaked clothing from his white body. There in the right breast was the gaping wound where the murderous lead had entered. And the bright red of life welled up and out of this purple wound and coursed in a crimson stream down his side.

"Martinus!" I whispered. "Martinus!"

To my great delight the white eyelids fluttered a bit, then opened, but his eyes were still glazed with unconsciousness.

"Barent," he sighed. "Don't bother me until I finish the dirty dog."

This was the sentence already framed for his lips when Bevens' pistol spoke.

It was with joy I noted that, as his breath returned, no white, frothy bubbles spewed out of the bullet wound, evidencing that the lung cavity had not been punctured and that there was a chance that he might live.

"Quick, a litter!" I called to the few men standing about. "A litter—and some one run for a surgeon!"

Martinus' eyes opened again and he looked at me reproachfully.

"Barent, if only you had not called!"

"Oh, my friend!" was all that I could say. "Oh, my dear friend!"

Willing hands quickly fashioned a rude stretcher and

Martinus was placed tenderly thereon and carried slowly and gently toward the tavern. While the litter was being constructed I looked about for John Bevens, but he had vanished. Without a word I turned and ran towards the distant tavern, seeing nothing but his evil, leering face before my eyes and muttering to myself, o'er and o'er again, in mad, primitive anger, that I would tear him limb from limb when next I laid my hands upon him. And always I felt that I was moving so slowly, though I ran with all my might, and a great fear swept o'er me that he might get his horse out and away before I could reach the stable.

I dashed into the barn like a man crazed, my fists knotted, roaring my wrath, but he was not there, although a stable boy was already throwing the saddle on his horse. Turning swiftly I raced to the tap-room, heaving the door open with a crash, and there stood John Bevens before the little bar, holding a glass of apple brandy in his slim, white fingers.

There was no time or voice for words. Muttering strange noises in my throat, I thrust the gaping villagers aside and sprang upon John Bevens, seizing his thin, soft neck in my crushing fingers. Against my sudden onslaught he wilted in my hands, offering no resistance, and in disgust I flung him from me so that he reeled across the floor and fetched up against the opposite wall with a stunning crash, his fingers clutching anxiously at his stinging throat.

"Coward!" he gasped in a choking, stammering voice. "Coward!"

"Now, by the eternal, I will pay that debt, John Bevens!" I roared.

"Strike," he muttered, stepping towards me, "strike, if you dare!"

For answer I struck him full in the face, so that he

staggered back against the card players, tipping over table, chairs and men, scattering money and cards upon the floor. There was a roar of voices—men cursed and cried out in anger.

“Now will you fight me?” I bellowed.

“With pistols,” Bevens answered thickly, a hand to his bleeding lips, “with pistols like a gentleman.”

Other villagers came running, surging into the tap room—crowding up until we were ringed about with closely packed bodies and tense, drawn faces. The spectators were breathing heavily, eyes staring, fists clenched, as men will when in the presence of physical combat. On my right, crowded out more than the rest because of his huge bulk, was Frank the Butcher, just as he had come from his shop, in bloody apron and holding two huge butcher knives in his red hands.

“With pistols, like a gentleman!” Bevens all but whispered, the blood dripping through his fingers down upon the white ruffles of his shirt. “With pistols, as soon as I can get them loaded, according to the code!”

“No doubt but you would like to shoot me!”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure.” There were bloody bubbles on his crimson lips.

And, remembering the blow he had given me in the courtyard somewhat earlier in the day, I brought my hand across his white face in a resounding smack which fairly tingled my finger tips.

“I return that blow you gave me this afternoon, John Bevens!” I cried. “I return it with interest.”

“You will pay for that, damn you!” he glared, stung into action. “You shall pay for that with your very life.”

It was well for me that his pistols were both empty.

“As you choose, sir.”

"I'll fix you just as I fixed that loud-mouthed friend of yours."

"No doubt of it—could you also catch me not looking."

"You dare not face me!"

"If you want a duel you shall have it, John Bevens," I answered in a hard voice.

The men about us crowded hastily back, to give us room, muttering under their breaths. Outside I heard Tjerck bellowing madly for the Bailiff and there was the rattle of flying feet as belated citizens hurried to the scene. Turning to the gaping butcher behind me, I seized the glistening knives from his hands and one of them I tossed at John Bevens' feet where it struck point first in the hardwood floor and stood upright, quivering like a thing of life.

"Take that knife, John Bevens," I called hoarsely.

"Take that knife, and defend yourself."

"With—with—knives?" he faltered. "Knives?"

"With knives!" I cried, "the Mohegan code—and quite as good as any other for ought I know. You would have a duel, now take that knife and defend yourself, John Bevens."

With staring eyes he looked down at the glistening knife at his feet, licking his bloody lips, his hands clenched by his sides, then his breast rose and fell in a mighty sigh and, hanker pressed to his bleeding face, he turned quickly to the door, the crowd falling away before him as though the men feared his touch. I only remember that I sprang after him but was thrust back by Tjerck and the slouchy Bailiff and that I laughed, with little mirth, as I cast the knife from me and stalked out to meet the men who were carrying Martinus into the yard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PROPPED up with soft pillows Martinus lay at ease in the white four-poster, his face beaming with perfect comfort and sweet content, despite the fact that he was dangerously wounded. The dormer room itself was spotless, from the bright rugs on the floor, the cushioned rocking chairs, to the flowered and figured Chinese wall-paper. And the two tiny paned dormer windows, into which peeked the bright October sun, were resplendent with huge pots of queen's lace and wild asters.

"Barent," sighed Martinus drowsily, "I hate ever to get well."

"Martinus!" I cried in surprise as I whirled about and stared at him. "Why should you—"

But my question was answered even before it was asked, for, at this very moment, entered pretty Zara, carrying a white napkin-covered tray upon which was deftly balanced a steaming bowl of savory chicken broth. Starched and ruffled, in white bibbed apron, her bright blue eyes filled with tender sympathy, the sheen of the reflected sunlight in the gold of her hair, she was most beautiful and lovable.

While my eyes followed her in open admiration, understanding perfectly Martinus' reluctance to get beyond the convalescent stage, pretty Zara set down the tray and rearranged the pillows under her patient's head. As she bent over him a half naked left arm stole out from beneath the bright quilts and encircled her white neck, drawing her smiling face down towards him—so I hastily turned

about and gazed out of the open window into the yard where the lazy chickens dusted in the driveway.

For all his idle words Martinus was badly wounded, although the pistol bullet had, most fortunately, glanced from one of his stout ribs and ploughed upward towards the top of his shoulder, where it lay securely embedded in the muscles and where it was like to remain for many a day. The wound was nicely packed and bandaged and there was no immediate danger, unless complications set in, and that he was quite willing to lie a-bed and wait for the wound to heal there could be no doubt.

"Oh, Mr. Creighton," cried Zara anxiously, "do you think he will get well?"

"Never!" cried Martinus. "You will have to nurse me all the rest of my life, sweetheart."

"Hush," she commanded, closing his lips with her pretty fingers. "Oh, hush!"

"Martinus is a lucky dog," I sighed. "Lucky not to have been killed outright and luckier still to have you to care for him, Zara."

"Oh," she blushed prettily.

"The luckiest in the world," sighed Martinus.

"He will get well of his bullet wound," I added. "But that arrow wound in the heart, it will grow worse and worse, I greatly fear, until he dies of old age or I kill him out of jealousy."

"Oh, Mr. Creighton!" she laughed and turned again to him, so that I made haste to leave the room. And there were soft cooings and love murmurings behind me, and the sound of lips meeting, which made me very lonely indeed.

Down stairs I found the lanky Bailiff holding the bar-

room inmates at bay while he raked them with questions. In his left fist he held a blood-stained butcher knife and with this ocular evidence before them he was endeavouring to find witnesses of the duel.

"There has been a dool here," he shook his long head wisely and stabbed the air with a bony forefinger. "A bloody an' murderous dool—yes, siree!—an' somebody has got to pay th' penalty of th' law—blister me if they ain't!"

"A bloody dool!" echoed Old Jot, thumping the floor with his staff. "Well, now I never!"

"Where?" asked Jan, innocently. "A dool! Where?"

"Right here, sir," retorted the Bailiff, waving the red knife. "Two of them! An' here's th' evidence—ab-so-lutely!"

"Jest m' luck," groaned Jot. "Jest m' cussid luck—turned aside t' spit an' some one fights a dool—a bloody dool, right when I ain't a-lookin'."

"They vas goin' ter fight!" puffed Tjerck.

"Ah, Tjerck, if every fight wus fit whut wus a-goin' ter be, judgin' from th' language, Tjerck," grinned Jan Budge, "there wouldn't be an ounce o' blood left in th' country—not an ounce, Tjerck."

"He saidt as how he vould kill him!" roared Tjerck, still excited.

"An' if words'd kill, Tjerck, there'd be mighty few o' us left, almighty few, let me tell y'."

"It's agin th' law to fight a dool," continued the Bailiff. "It's agin th' law, ab-so-lutely!—an' any one as commits a dool in my Bailiwick, by th' great Jehovah, has got t' pay th' full penalty of th' law—blister me if he ain't!"

Here he lowered his heavy head and scowled fearfully

and threateningly at me, eyes blazing. One big hand dropped into his capacious coat pocket and I heard a slight metallic jingle like the rattle of handcuffs.

"Vell, vat's a-stopping ov you?" asked Tjerck. "Go aheads und do some ding, vether it's your dooty or nod."

"Crime runs rampant here," sighed Jan Budge.

"Th' verry woods be full o' highwaymen, booglers, thugs, murderers, robbers an' bandits," echoed Old Jot, "'t' say nothin' o' th' murderous doolers an' Anti-rent-ers."

"An' hardly a day goes by but what some dastardly deed is did," added Jan.

"An' th' jail empty as an old boot!"

"Seems like all th' criminals in th' State had just drawn in here since 'lection time, knowin' they wus perfectly safe," sighed Jan Budge. "They've 'bout used up all th' old crimes, from stealin' melons down t' murder, an' I expect they'll be inventin' new ones 'fore long."

"Criminals know where they be safe, Jan."

"I'm a-goin' to arrest some one—" began the Bailiff, glaring savagely at me. He stepped slowly forward, jingling the handcuffs in his pocket.

But he was interrupted by a commotion in the crowd, and much to his surprise *The Badger* stood before us to confound the astounded Bailiff and fix him with his piercing eyes.

"What particular bit of folly are you about to commit now?" asked *The Badger*.

"Why, why," stammered Mr. Bailiff. "I'm a-goin' t' arrest this man—"

"You better wait until some one swears out a warrant," suggested *The Badger*.

"There's been a dool fit here."

"There has been near murder done here," he corrected. "Go and arrest John Bevens if you've got to arrest some one before you can sleep."

"But he has gone, got clean away!"

"Then go and find him."

"But, but, he's out of my Bailiwick!"

"What y' got t' say, now, Jan Budge?" cackled Old Jot as he ceased to gurgle and chuckle and straightened up to wipe his streaming eyes. "What y' got t' say now, I asks?"

"Who, me?" snorted Jan. "Well, great guns, Jot, since y' asks me, I'll say I'm dryer'n a covered bridge, I be. That's whut I got to say, if any one wants t' know!"

The Badger drew me aside to one corner of the room and over a glass of white-capped ale he reported good progress in our case, at the same time warning me to be careful.

"If that gang sees that we are like to win," he cautioned, "they will stop at nothing. If I can read the signs, John Bevens is already in hot water financially and a decision against him would spell ruin."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE post brought a short but emphatic letter from Lawyer Zodic. It was with difficulty that I deciphered his legal scrawl, for there were always too few letters in Zodic's written words and vastly too many wriggles. It was to the effect that I must set my house in order for a wife or else prepare for a long time in gaol to reflect upon my folly.

"Get a wife—get the land—get the money!" was the wisdom of Zodic's abominable handwriting. "And get it quick!"

A wife—why, in God's name, if a man must marry, shouldn't he marry the woman he wants?

The money—why should so much of life depend upon a few bits of bright metal and a handful of green papers.

Ah, well; I couldn't appreciate Zodic's anxiety, for had I not of life nearly two full weeks? *The Badger's* news was so encouraging that, despite old Zodic's anxious letter, I determined that I would not marry my acres on the morrow.

These two weeks I would spend at Creighton Manor, as near as possible to Oakwood and the little cabin where lived Mother Martha—where Ronella was like to call. Immediately I set out for the Manor house, where I had not visited since a child, to see if it was at all habitable.

Near the edge of the village old Doctor Spadeholts came out to speak to me about the condition of Martinus. The

doctor's spectacles balanced perilously on the end of his little black specked nose, so that his dull blue eyes could look over them with the greatest ease and freedom. In one heavy hand he carried a mortar, in which he was mixing some philter, and in the other heavy hand a stone pestle. Hair and whiskers were long and white, in complete disorder, and his clothing seemed to consist of an old worn linen-duster which covered him from shoulders to feet.

"You better see about settlin' up your friend's earthly affairs," warned the doctor, glaring at me over the specks, "and be prepared for the worst."

"Why, doctor," I cried. "I thought Martinus was getting along fine."

"Fine today—worse tomorrow," he glared.

"Why, doctor," I exclaimed. "Surely he will be better tomorrow?"

"I ain't so damn cock-sure," he growled, waving the pestle in my face. "He's taken the case into his own hands, he has, and I warn ye right here and now that I ain't responsible for the consequences—not in the least!"

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"He's got a bad wound, your friend has—a mighty bad an' dangerous wound, but he thinks he knows more'n I do—more'n all the doctors in the land—more'n old Esculapius himself."

"Now what has Martinus done?"

"Done, why bless my blood and bones, sir!" the doctor snorted in abject disgust. "He wouldn't let me bleed him—that's what he's done! I was just a sharpenin' up the scalpel on my boot when he says, says he: 'What you going to do now, Doc?' And says I: 'I'm goin' to bleed ye a little,' says I. 'Not by a damn sight,' says he. 'I've

bled enough.' 'Got to bleed ye,' says I. And what do ye think, sir? He ups and threatened me with his walking stick."

"But, don't you think he bled enough from the wound?" I asked, keeping back a smile.

"And he wouldn't let me probe for the ball," continued the offended doctor. "Soon as he sees me take the probe out of my westcut pocket, where I always carries it handy like, and wipe it off on my hanker, he lets out a yell. 'I'm a strong man, Doc,' says he; 'guess I can carry a little bit of lead like that!' I never saw a wound I wanted to probe so. 'Jest let me locate that ball for ye,' I begged. 'I'm not that curious, Doc,' says he; 'I don't care where it is so long as it doesn't rattle, an' besides I want to keep it—for a souvenir.' "

The good doctor shook his head in deep dejection when I refused to intercede for him and hurried back indoors.

It was only a short walk from the village to Creighton Manor. As I came up the all but hidden flagstones to the old Manor house, deserted for so many years, because Aunt Abigail preferred to live in town, a rabbit scurried from the bushy tangle beside me and ran thumping away over the dry leaves. A flock of migrating robins twittered in the green cedars and near the high columned porch I flushed a cock grouse that boomed up from the tangle of weeds and went whirring away to the nearby woods.

Coonraad Von Laar had been a Dutchman of taste. This was evidenced by the location of his Manor house upon a little rise of ground overlooking the nearby river. Much of the natural forest had been left about the house to give it shade and shelter. And down by the river bank, hidden by the bluff, was the rotting pier where my grandfather lightered out his Indian cargoes, as well as the

empty warehouse wherein he stored his goods awaiting a rise of market.

The house itself was of stone construction, almost box-like in shape, with quaint dormer windows, surmounted by a rail, and a heavy columned, ivy-covered porch ornamenting the front. On each side was a broad red brick chimney which added a bit of colour and life to the dull grey stonework. The solid wood shutters, originally painted a light blue, but now faded and stormbeaten, were all closed but one, and that one, fluttering to and fro with the varying air currents, gave forth the most dismal groans and hollow, ghostly echoes.

It seemed my booted feet made a deal of noise as I strode up the worn stone steps and across the paintless veranda floor. I thrust home the heavy brass key, gave it a twist and the bolt grated back. The door stuck in its place as though it had not been disturbed in a long time, but a vigorous heave sent it open, creaking a protest at being thus rudely disturbed. A gust of stale air sprang out to meet me and the dark interior echoed with the hollowness of a vault. Ghosts and goblins feared I naught and stumbling over the old furniture, not without some strong language, I found my way into the living room where I quickly lighted a flare.

The first thing to catch my eye was the imprint of a man's hand on the dusty top of a mahogany reading table. I thought this was the impression of my own hand, so fresh and distinct was it, but the lack of the index finger sent the shivers racing up and down my back. The flaming torch burned down and scorched my fingers while I stood there in perplexity and something of fright, staring at the hand print and wondering how such a thing could be when the house was supposed to be empty.

A left hand without the index finger! "Well, well," I exclaimed as recognition came, "my robberman again!" I wondered if he still sought the parchment in a foreign hand. It was of no value to me and in a spirit of bravado I took from my pocket the sheepskin Jolly Jack had returned to me, along with a few worthless letters, and tossed them on the mantel in plain sight. And the little gold god of ill-luck, I set up beside the chimney breast where he could grin at me to his heart's content.

And, as I did so, there on the mantel, behind a slight jog in the brickwork, I saw a bit of candle. I took it down and the wick was still hot, evidencing that it had been but recently blown out, perhaps by the very fellow who had carelessly pressed his mutilated hand down on the dusty table.

"Ah, very well," said I aloud. "Only humans require candles to find their way around haunted houses and are able to leave the weight of their fist recorded on dusty furniture."

I seized my heavy thorn-apple staff and prepared to search the house. I looked down at the floor, as my eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, and discovered that some large footed man, evidently the owner of the mysterious hand, had walked back and forth seemingly over every inch of that living room. Nor were all of these tracks new. They seemed to be of all ages and dates, as though the same fellow had come again and again to pace through the room like a caged animal searching a way out.

"He's getting altogether too intimate," thought I. "I'll find him and kick him out of here mighty quick."

Through the great house I stalked in hot anger, swinging my staff, poking into every chest and closet without finding hide or hair of my strange visitor. I examined

all the windows and doors and, strangest of all, they showed every sign of having been closed for many months, being securely locked, with cobwebs hanging to nearly every one of them.

"Well," growled I, coming back to the living room. "He came in like a ghost, but he made signs like a mere human. I shall be here from now on and if he comes again we shall have an understanding."

I gathered dead limbs and built a roaring fire in the library fire-place which soon sucked the foul air from the room and removed the vault-like dampness that had gathered there. Then with an old besom which I found in the woodshed I swept up and removed the dirt, and otherwise cleansed the room as best I could.

"Next week," I mused. "I will look me up a wife."

A wife!

I smiled grimly to myself.

Was I, eight and twenty, my own master beyond all doubt, to marry a harriidan for a few hundred acres of land that I might escape a debtor's prison and save my friends from ruin?

While I stood there on the front porch, slowly filling my pipe, and pondering over this unanswerable question, my ear caught the shrill notes of whistling and around the corner of the house hurried a quaint figure of a man, his thick lips pursed, his round, smooth face red with blowing. He was square of build, being nearly as wide as he was high, and looking for all the world like a fat beetle walking about on its hind legs. From under the small cloth hat peeked iron-grey hair; two twinkling little blue eyes were half hidden by bulging russet cheeks.

At sight of me the whistling stopped, although the lips pursed and puckered worse than ever, as though from

habit, and the bulging cheeks grew even redder. Snatching off his battered hat the square man addressed me as though we had known each other for years.

"So you've come at last," he whistled.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," I answered pleasantly.

"I saw your smoke 'n I come right over," he explained.

"It didn't take you long."

"Expect to stay a while?" an innocent whistle now.

"Depends a good deal on the Sheriff."

"If you're goin' to live in this old house I reckon you'll be wantin' a man to help you clean up a bit here, sir?" The whistle came pouring out again, rippling in some merry jig-tune.

"I reckon I will," I nodded, lighting up my pipe.

He whistled a few more bars, cocking one blue eye at the interior of the house, then stopped long enough to answer.

"I'm th' man," said he, resuming his whistling. "Th' werry man!"

"I hadn't thought of hiring a troubadour."

"A troo-be-door!" he exclaimed, growing red and bristling, his whistle falling to a faint hiss. "Now I hopes you don't mean anything by that, sir?"

"A sort of travelling minstrel," I explained.

"Meens-trel! Troo-be-door!" he gasped helpless, his red face puckered all out of shape. "Ye needn't throw any slants at me, y' understand?"

"A wandering bard—one whose dulcet notes ring out in bosky dells, etc."

"Oh," said he, "Lord love me! I don't ever do that, sir,—I just whistles, y' understand?"

"Can you do anything besides whistle?"

The music stopped instanter while he tried in vain to smooth out his face.

"I reckon I can," said he, "but I can do it best if I whistle, y' understand? It's my music-kel disposition."

I puffed away steadily.

"I'm afflicted with a werry merry disposition, I be, y' understand?" he explained. "I whistles whenever I feels happy, y' understand? It sort-a gives vent to my good feelings, sir."

"And what do you do when you feel sad?"

"Why, why since you asks me, sir, when I feel sad, why, I whistles, y' understand?—only different tunes as ye might say,—it seems to make me feel better!"

And straightway he began to whistle again.

"And what else can you do?"

"Do?" He gave a great whistle of surprise. "Do? Why, sir, y' understand? I can do all an' everything about the place."

"And about how much do you want for such extensive service?"

He whistled a few more bars of the *Devil's Hornpipe*, squinting one little blue eye up at the sky, then peeped into the house, his round face red to the point of apoplexy.

"How about sixteen dollars a month and find myself?"

"Er, is it much of a task to find you?"

He stopped in the middle of *Turkey in the Straw*.

"Why, sir, why, I finds myself!"

"I'm right glad of it," I answered. "Because I haven't the time or inclination to be looking you up whenever there is anything to be done."

He took off his hat, scratched his round head and whistled with astonishment.

"I mean sixteen dollars a month and *board* myself," he explained.

"Oh," said I.

"I don't really find anything," he confessed.

"Ah," said I, "that is indeed too bad. I was hoping that you might help me to find my keyholes."

"Keyholes!" he whistled. "You don't mean to say you've gone an' lost a whole batch o' keyholes?"

"Exactly," I nodded, puffing away, "four of them."

"Four?"

Here he looked at me very curiously to the tune of *Pop Goes the Weasel*.

"And now, come to think of it," I added. "I've lost the keys as well."

"That makes it harder!"

"Twice as hard," I nodded with never a smile.

"I'm a square man, y' understand?" he conceded, "an' so I hasten to confess, sir, that I bit off more'n I could chew when I said I could do everything."

"You certainly are square," I agreed, smiling at his quaint figure.

"Th' squarest in th' whole county, sir, and music-kel, too, but I won't hire out to look for no keyholes, y' understand, nor keys either? No, not for no sixteen a month. I'm a farmer, I be, a handy man around a place, not a locksmith, y' understand?"

"I understand," said I. "There will probably be enough other work about the house and premises to keep you busy."

"I reckon there will be," he agreed, resuming his whistle. "So I can consider myself hired."

"You can," said I. "If you will stop the whistle long enough to tell me who I am hiring."

"My name is Tug—plain Tug Muggin—th' squarest man in th' county."

"I'm pleased to meet and employ you, Mr. Tug Muggin."

"Thanks!" said he. "I'm happy to be workin' for you." And whistling a merry roundelay, to satisfy his "werry" merry disposition, he turned away to the house and his work of cleaning up the place.

I found an old bridle path, now all but choked with brush and weeds, which wound along the rocky lake shore, twisting and turning about the rocks and trees, dipping into the fern grown vales and hollows and wandering more leisurely along the waterside. This path brought me out into an old pasture lot some distance from Mother Martha's cabin and, as I stepped out of the woods, a man who had been standing in a little clump of bushes down by the lake shore, and but a short distance from the cabin, turned quickly at sight of me and hurried away in the direction of the village. He moved so hurriedly, and the brush so thick, that I caught no more than an indistinct glimpse of the fellow and could not even guess who he might be.

"Mother Martha," said I, accepting the chair she offered me, "you now have a new neighbour."

"Ho,—ho," she answered cheerily. "I saw the smoke curling o'er the woods and so I knew that the Creightons had come back to their own."

"I moved in this morning."

"And next thou wilt be looking for a wife," she chuckled.

"My Aunt Abigail was determined that I should marry."

"And well she knew what was good for thee," she replied wisely, reproving me with wagging forefinger. "A man should be happily wed."

"But this doesn't promise to be a happy marriage," I sighed.

"Ah, but she will love thee in time!"

"She!" I cried. "Why, Mother, I have not yet found the woman."

"Then thou art indeed blind as a bat," she chuckled. "Blind as a bat, young sir!"

"It isn't my eyes that are at fault—" I protested.

"Then thy heart, young sir, is of stone."

"Nor am I hard of heart, Mother," I answered, "but I must marry soon, and for money."

"Don't try to mix love and gold, young sir, it's far worse than oil and water. Many, oh, very many have tried it, o'er and o'er, and never yet did they succeed."

"There is no choice, Mother—I must have the money."

"Better take love whilst thou can," she warned. "And get the money later."

"I must pay my debts," I sighed.

"A few debts are good for a man," she laughed. "Ha, ha, ha, they keep one from realizing what a curse laziness can be if it gets a chance."

"But debts do so blister one's pride, Mother."

"Pride is a careful driver, young sir. Pride keepeth more men out of trouble than fear of gaols."

Chuckling and muttering to herself Mother Martha hobbled away across the rag carpet rugs to a little pantry built in at the head of the cellar stairing and, after a considerable noise of crock covers being lifted and replaced, she came hurrying back with a blue plate piled high with rich, dark molasses cookies and a pitcher of foaming, amber cider.

"Always tomorrow is another day, young sir,—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

When the plate was quite clean and the pitcher empty I asked the question which had been uppermost in my mind since I saw the skulking form by the lake.

"Mother, does John Bevens ever come here?"

The blue china plate slipped from her fingers and dropped to the floor with a crash, shivering to an hundred fragments.

"John Bevens!" she exclaimed. "What in the world would he be doing here?"

"I thought I saw him by the lake as I came over."

"Probably some hunter looking for ducks."

"But he had no fowling piece, Mother."

"Beware of John Bevens!" cried Mother Martha in a strange voice, emphasizing her warning with a lifted forefinger. "Shun that man like a poisonous snake. Watch his every move, young sir; oh, watch and watch, night and day, lest evil come to thee from that terrible man!"

"I trust I am not a coward, Mother."

"Only in love are you afraid, young sir."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ALL thought of John Bevens vanished with a glimpse of figured blue silk amid the red and gold leaves along the lake, announcing the coming of Ronella Hartwell. I only know that words failed me in greeting her and that I lingered long o'er her fingers with her whispered name on my lips.

"So, at last, you have acquired your acres." Ronella stared out of the cabin door as though the lake was all new and strange to her.

"Not yet," said I. "I have merely established myself there by way of a beginning."

"Oh," said she a little disdainfully, as I thought.

"To complete the title I must get me a wife," I finished.

"There is a Jack for every Jill," chortled Mother Martha. "When every Tom, Dick and Harry can find a wife there must be one for such a bright, handsome and clever young man as Barent Creighton. Ho, ho, ho, hooo."

"Girls are very particular nowadays," I sighed.

"Ha, ha, ha, but none the less eager," laughed Mother Martha. "Girls are just girls, now as well as in my day, young sir, for ever and ever."

"But they do not want a worthless and penniless husband," I ventured.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, no one knows what they want; they do not know themselves most of the time," answered Mother. "I tell thee, young sir, love is what they want—love and plenty of it. Love asks nothing of life but love, young sir!"

With this last remark Mother Martha seized her checkered, slatted sunbonnet from a peg behind the door and, chuckling mightily to herself, went out to look after her Dorking chickens. I suspect that, being a witch, and therefore possessing a superior knowledge of all material things, she knew that two young folk of opposite sex are always quite content to be alone.

"Ronella!" I cried as soon as Mother Martha had gone. "Ronella!"

But when I came towards her so eagerly the maid stepped back in alarm.

"No," said she. "No."

"Then you are not glad to see me?"

"It isn't that," hesitating over the words. "I am afraid!"

"Afraid of me?"

"Of myself," she answered seriously enough.

"Each and every time we meet, you are more distant and reserved."

"If my father knew that I were here he would be furious."

"Only last week came he seeking me for a son-in-law." I affected a wheezy sigh.

"He feels that you tricked him and it makes him mad to be beaten even in a horse trade."

"Oh," said I. "So father is to be considered, after all, in affairs of the heart?"

"Really, this is hardly to be so classified."

"And I suppose he would lock you in the castle turret if he knew that you chanced to meet me here today."

"He, he might do even worse," she answered somewhat sadly.

"Or, mayhap, marry you off to some bold robber baron."

"Even that," she nodded.

"Well," said I. "I wonder what became of that willful and stubborn young woman who once ran away from home because her father had arranged to wed her to a penniless good-for-nothing in New York?"

"She has changed—I really don't know why."

A broad band of sunlight moved along the yellow floor, as though beckoning us to make haste and come out—doors ere the fair day was done. The soft October breeze lingered at the door, bringing with it the perfume of the nearby forest and the pungent, aromatic scent of ripened weeds and grasses. It was not in flesh and blood and youth to resist and soon Ronella and I were walking, side by side, along the lake shore beneath the trees. Tall and graceful was this country maid, walking along with an easy, swinging stride begot by many rambles over hill and meadow. She carried herself well erect and did not shy away from me, as some maids will, nor yet was she o'erbold. The bright sunlight touched her wavy hair with the ruddy fires of October and the crisp fall wind brought a riot of colour to her cheeks.

"When I am alone, Ronella," I began very seriously, looking down to the loose tendrils of hair which played against her smooth cheek. "When I am alone it is easy to convince myself that I must go ahead with my sacrifice."

"What sacrifice?" she asked artfully.

"This, this marrying of my acres, as you express it."

"Oh," said she.

"But when I am with you, Ronella, all my noble resolutions and fine interpretations of business honour are scattered to the four winds and I think only of you."

"I would rather live in a cabin," said she scornfully,

"with, with a man I—love—than to have all the land in Christendom."

"As for that," said I, "I quite agree with you."

We walked slowly along the mighty columns of the wood, on a soft carpet of painted leaves, both of us puzzling mightily over this strange thing called Honour. The maples and basswoods rained gaudy leaves down upon us and the chestnuts and hickories offered us nuts. The denizens of the wood did not fear us and bird and beast called out cheerily as we passed.

"Why has your father taken such a sudden dislike to me?" I asked the question foremost in my mind.

"He has heard of your business failure," she answered.

"Through John Bevens?"

"Perhaps."

"It is not yet a failure."

"Father did not know how badly you needed that money."

"I did not ask him for money."

"But your lawyer, Zodoc, did," said she.

"Curse old Zodoc for a meddling old fool—" I began savagely.

"And yet," she sighed, "but for him we would never have met."

"Bless him for the god-father of my greatest happiness!" I exclaimed.

"Father does not like you," she faltered.

"Very well," said I. "I shall try to bear it. But if your father is determined to select a husband for you," I continued, "I hope that he has profited by his previous mistake and picked out one who is successful, rich, powerful and promising, the soul of virtue—a regular paragon of a man."

"There are no perfect men," she laughed.

"Then I presume he has found one with the required number of acres!"

"Acres?" she exclaimed.

"He confided to Zodoc that the annexation of the Creighton estate was his cherished hope."

"Oh," said she. "Now I know why he was so anxious for me to marry you."

"Now you know why both of us were so anxious for that contract."

She did not speak for some few minutes.

"It is no longer a question of more acres for Oakwood."

"Then you will not marry this country bumpkin?"

"What country bumpkin?" she looked up in surprise.

"This young man whom your father has selected as a poor substitute for myself," I explained.

"I am quite sure your place will never be filled," she laughed.

"I hope not. But I suppose your father has others in mind."

"I'm afraid he has."

Instantly I thought of John Bevens—but as quickly banished him from my mind, for surely the Lord of Oakwood, if he loved his fair daughter at all, would never consider John Bevens as a son-in-law.

The pathway narrowed down between the close standing trees so that we must needs walk very close together and when she stopped to speak to me—

"Barent Creighton," she began with an effort. "I think I ought to tell you—"

Her hand was on my arm, her face very close to mine, and in her anxious eyes I could see that something of great moment had o'erpowered all natural shyness and timidity

to the point of speech. But just then, with her rounded breasts rising and falling before mine eyes, the slender column of her white neck melting into the sweeping curves of her wide shoulders so near, the devils of the flesh seized me.

"Ronella! Ronella!—"

There was a roar in my ears and a mist in my eyes, and before I could speak coherently she had torn my arms away from her with a fine show of strength and stood before me like a fury, face crimson, eyes flashing.

"You—you—like all the rest!" she cried.

"Worse," I confessed in shame.

"A, a common man—"

"With a most uncommon woman," I interrupted weakly, "alone in a rainbow forest and October!"

"You would dare—"

"Anything," with bowed head, "anything if only you liked me."

"You hurt me!"

"I didn't mean to."

"And vexed me."

"I am sorry."

"And you know my temper, sir!"

"Alas, I have heard a great deal about it," I confessed.

"Then," she cautioned, "let us have no more foolishness."

"Where there is so much fool—with red hair—there is bound to be a little foolishness."

"You grow too bold, sir."

"Growing apace before such a woman!"

Now as I humbled myself before her a shadow seemed to come between me and the sun—the very day grew dark and cold and foreboding. All my great joy in seeing her, in

being with her, faded like the morning mists of the lake before the rising sun; seemed to disintegrate, to dissemble and dissolve into thin air. It was no longer a perfect day and the glory of youth within me turned cold and sour. By the way she had turned from me in anger, by the scorn in her eyes and the strength shown in avoiding me, I knew that here was no answer to my passion.

"Sorry," I explained, "not that I am so bold, but sorry that you do not like me, Ronella."

"I have not said that I do not like you."

"Like was not exactly the word I would choose, did I dare, Ronella."

But I could see that a leaden weight of thought lay on her mind, that something had crushed out the boisterous exuberance of youth and subdued the willful spirit within. Now her head was bowed, her brows perplexed and drawn down into straight lines and her eyes were but long dark slits in heavy shadow.

"If—if—I am unwelcome Ronella—" I hesitated.

She looked at me in surprise.

"Unwelcome?"

"Or intrude in any way—"

"Oh, if I did not want your company I would certainly say so."

"If I have made you unhappy."

"Indeed, I am far happier than I deserve," she smiled, adding, "considering."

"You qualify it."

"Considering all—I—have to contend with—under the circumstances—and think about."

"Meaning present company?"

"No."

"Troubles, Ronella?"

"Yes," said she rather sadly.

"That I can help you with?"

"I am afraid not," she sighed, "you see they are—why—family troubles."

"I am truly sorry!"

And wondering what these family troubles, doubtless magnified and made more vital by feminine fears, might be, I promptly forgot my own, and hers too for that matter, when she reached out, like a child that wants comforting, and took my hand in her firm grasp.

With her hand in mine, the mists cleared and once again the sunlight beat to earth in a new glory and spread its genial warmth to every living thing. And, with the touch of her fingers, happiness came flooding back to me bringing the strength and courage I needed in the face of all my difficulties.

"Let us, Ronella, this day forget the shameful—er—bargain—that brought us together and—"

"Why, that is the best part of it," she exclaimed, much to my surprise.

"The best part?"

"So new—and strange, when I had never even imagined that you, that he, that any man would come to me—that way."

"And let us forget that I have but a few more days of life—" I began afresh.

"Of life, sir?"

"Yes," said I, "for I am not yet convinced that I shall ever marry these acres."

"Why," she cried, staring wide eyed at me, "why, Barent Creighton!"

"I don't believe now that money can save me."

"It, it would save you from gaol!"

"Yes," I admitted, "but, but—not from myself."

"Oh," sighed she, "I don't believe I quite understand."

Nor could I understand this woman who flared up so easily within my arms only to twist her fingers with mine a few minutes after—who seemed so unhappy scarce an hour ago and was now all smiles and sunshine again.

"At least, we both have today," she laughed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“**C**OME in!” I called as cheerily as a desperate, disheartened man might, alone in an old and haunted house.

The door opened, I heard leather boots scraping in the hall. Then I looked up, hardly believing my staring eyes, and sprang to my feet in astonishment. There, framed by the doorway, were half a dozen frightful things in semi-human form.

Their faces were covered by hideous sheepskin and muslin masks, grotesquely painted and daubed with bright colours, their heads were crowned with waving feathers. In barbaric splendour were they decked out in all manner of gaudy finery and brightly figured calico, in brass arm bracelets and earrings. They suggested Indians, but, surely, no Indian was ever garbed as one of these. Then it dawned upon me, as my scalp stopped twitching, that I was being waited upon by a committee of Anti-renters. I could fairly smell the tar pot!

“How!” greeted I, as bravely as I could under the circumstances.

“How!” grunted one. “How!”

They filed into the room, grotesque, frightful, foreboding. I stood up, supporting myself with a chair, smiling a greeting I did not feel. The devil would have been welcome indeed compared to this. Oh, some frightful stories I had heard of these disguised rebels and their treatment of greedy landlords!

"I am honoured by such a large delegation of distinguished chiefs," said I. "And, to tell the truth, I was lonesome enough to welcome old Man Trouble himself."

"Old Man Trouble is always with us," answered one man.

"I surmise as much," I answered. "But trouble and I have met before—often."

"We've dropped in for a little pow-wow," answered the Sachem in a gruff voice. "And 'fore we get through you may not be so glad to see us."

A dozen other "Indians" filed into the room, one of them burdened with a smelly old tar-pot and a blackened whitewash brush. Another struggled with a bulging, bilowy bundle that could contain nothing else but feathers. And the third carried a menacing handful of well selected hickory sprouts to be used, as I judged, in striping the backs of recalcitrant landlords and deputy sheriffs.

"All right," said I, "go ahead and pow-wow."

"You're the trustee of this Manor," accused the leader.

"I am."

"You have expressed a desire to collect certain back rents?"

"I did," said I. "I needed the money."

"You won't need it half so bad, if at all, when we get through."

"I'm cured now," I admitted, looking at the tar kettle. "I never felt less desire for mere money in all my life. I don't want money, I wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it and certainly it wouldn't buy me happiness."

"I hear that you are about to get married and acquire title to this Manor."

"Such was my base intention."

"We think we can change your mind."

"The lady has changed it for me—refuses to even consider it."

"You will find another."

"I'm afraid not," I sighed.

"If you do acquire title will you sell these farms to their rightful owners?"

"I will sell them to Old Nick himself if he has the ready cash to pay for them."

"At a reasonable price?"

"The bargains I will offer in real estate, once I get title to this Manor, will make the Louisiana purchase look like robbery."

"You mean that?"

"Each and every word! It will be cheaper to buy of me than to steal a farm."

"Your grandfather was a good man and a fine neighbour, although he had some mistaken notions about Manor farms."

"I trust I have inherited some of his finer qualities along with the family curios."

"He never was hard on his tenants."

"As yet I have no title to this land," I owned. "Aunt Abigail fixed it so that the title goes to my wife."

"That's just it," he growled. "We hear that Old Hartwell will get his clutches on this patent."

"No," I confessed. "That deal is off. I broke our matrimonial agreement and he has broken off diplomatic relations with me."

"Broken what?"

"Our friendship," I explained. "We don't speak now."

Then I explained to my disguised callers that the land was left to me only in trust and that it was extremely

doubtful if I ever got married and just at present it looked as though I soon would cease to exist, as Barent Creighton anyway, and leave them jointly and severally with a farm or two on their hands.

My "Indians" made themselves quite at home and our "pow-wow" proved quite a success. At last I produced The Elder's magic note and this recommendation from the Old-News-Carrier seemed to assure them of my character. Anyway they soon filed out, tar-pot, feathers, hickory whips and all, leaving me none the worse for their visit.

For a long time I pondered over this rent question, turning it over and over in my mind, until my pipe went out and grew cold in my fingers, until the fire on the wide hearth died down to a bed of grey ash and a handful of red coals and the black shadows reached out from the dark corners and took full possession of the room.

I was not drowsy, but conscious of a strange sensation which seized me as though I were in the foul clutches of an evil dream. Like one who wakes from a fetid nightmare of death, limbs trembling, heart quaking and fear shaking him inwardly, I stiffened in my chair and stared at the empty, meaningless darkness, hearing no sound, seeing no living thing. And yet was I mortally certain that there was another presence, an unknown something, in the room!

With every sense straining to catch the merest confirmation of this suggestion, with every effort of will and mind to convince myself that this panic was but foolishness, begotten by an ancient world-old dread of the dark, I sat there staring, dry-lipped and tense muscled, nerves taut and, yes, my throat pulsing.

Then it was I distinctly saw a dark shadow pass between me and a feeble ray of light which stole in from one

of the broken shutters. The light was there, streaming inwardly from some distant star above and now it was gone, only to re-appear after a little. It was as though some one had passed slowly and silently between me and the light! And above the thumping of my own heart I thought I could make out the soft whisper of padded feet whisking carefully over the carpeted floor.

With a mighty effort I straightened up and seized my staff from its place beside the chimney breast, making a considerable rattle as I did so. There was a muffled click, the tinkle of falling plaster as though a mouse was scurrying within the walls. I cast a paper upon the hot coals. For a second or two it curled and smoked furiously and then burst into yellow flame.

The room was quite empty!

Call it folly if you will, I merely describe, to the best of my poor ability, the sensations registered during those terrible few minutes when I was mortally sure, yet sensing nothing, that death stalked within the room, ready to reach out and touch me on the shoulder—a fearsome summons which permits no excuse or delay.

I am no believer in haunted houses, in ghosts and goblins (although there are enough inexplicable things) but I did remember the imprint of the mutilated hand on the table, the tracks on the floor and the warm candle on the mantel. For some unknown reason I looked around at the table *and there was the dusty imprint of a large hand!* I looked closer, and the index finger was missing.

My fears left me—all doubts vanished; a wave of hot anger shook me and with curses on my lips I seized my staff and began to search the house for the intruder.

Of course, I found nothing!

Just then cowhide boots clattered on the porch and with-

out otherwise announcing his presence Tug Muggin, the squarest man in the county, entered the room. Snatching his wool cap from his dishevelled shock of iron-grey hair he exploded in one mighty steamboat whistle. His face could not well be any redder and his cheeks were so puffed with blowing that his little blue eyes were quite hidden.

"Well," said I, "what is it, Mr. Muggin?"

"I've come, Mr. Creighton, y' understand!" he whistled three notes. "I've come back to tell you, sir, that I quits!"

"So you've been away?" I questioned.

"Just this evenin', sir; rather unexpected it was, an' somewhat o' a hurry too, y' understand?" He puffed and blew and pursed his lips. "But I've come back to tell you, sir, like as a man should, that I quits!"

"Oh, you've changed your mind about working for me?"

"I have," hissing from his puckered lips, "y' understand?"

"No, I do not understand," I confessed, "pray elucidate."

"E-lu-ki-date?" he gasped, twisting his red face in a mighty pucker. "Don't throw any slants—"

"State your case; proceed; go ahead; tell your story."

"Oh," said he, rounding his lips. "Oh, I just quits, that's all, an' it's enough, y' understand? I likes you, sir, an' I likes this here place, but I just can't get used to no ghosts, y' understand? They gets on my nerves, they do an' I quits."

"Ghosts!" I cried.

Tug nodded and whistled. "I'm a square man, whot lives up t' his word, but I warn't hired to associate with, nor to wait on no ghosts."

"To be sure nothing was said in the bargain to that

effect," I admitted. "I had no idea when I hired you that the place was haunted."

"An' so I quits this evenin', I did, an' right sudden it were too, y' understand?"

"I'm just beginning to understand," said I. "Perhaps if you didn't begin right in the middle of this adventure, trying to tell it both ways from the middle, I would understand better. Now when and where did you see this nocturnal prowler from the spirit realm?"

"Ghosts it were," corrected Tug.

"This ghost, then."

"Down in th' warehouse he were, y' understand? just 'fore dark. He came right out o' th' office where I'd just ben an' where he just wasn't."

"Just wasn't?"

"Not hide nor hair o' him not a minute 'fore he walks out o' there as big as life, y' understand? 'Good evenin',' says he, clapping a pistol to my ear. 'It's a fine evenin'.' 'It sure be,' said I, with a gasp at him an' his nerve. 'That fork's pretty heavy,' says he, 'I guess you better drop it.' And so I did. 'An' supper's 'bout ready,' says he, 'now hurry 'long.' An' with that, y' understand? he vanishes right through th' sidin' an' I looks about with th' lantern an' couldn't find hide nor hair o' him, y' understand, so I goes away from there in summat o' a hurry, y' understand? an' I'm just gettin' back."

"You must have gone quite a ways and at a fairly good speed," commented I, "judging from your looks and the time it has taken you to get back. Now what kind of a looking ghost was it?"

Tug whistled a snatch or two.

"He was th' biggedest footed ghostes I ever seed, y' understand?"

"Any other peculiarities?"

"He was taller 'n th' warehouse door an' as wide as th' window an' you could see right through him—"

"You didn't notice his hands?"

"No, but his feet—"

"That will do, Tug," I interrupted. "Don't worry about that ghost for it isn't a ghost at all."

"No ghost?" Tug whistled with surprise that I should doubt his word.

"Nothing of the kind," I explained. "It was nothing but a man looking for the lost keyholes."

"A crazy man lookin' fer keyholes?"

"Probably," I nodded.

"Then I wants my time—"

"Or it might be a burglar, Tug."

"A robber!" cried Tug, with a mighty blast. "A robber—wot?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"Whew! A robber, eh? Why, then I quits, I does, right now, y' understand?"

"Quits?"

"I sure do, y' understand? 'cause I'm more feared o' a robber than I be o' a ghost, or a crazy man either."

"He won't hurt you if you humour him," I explained.

"Humour him?" He puckered his face into another whistle. "Wot 'd ye mean, humour him?"

"Certainly, just make believe to do what he wants you to do."

"Wot, an' him with a pistol at my head?"

"In case he presents a pistol, Tug, as he is very like to do, you better obey with alacrity."

"Ee-lac-rity?"

"With speed—quickness—in a hurry."

“That’s jest wot I did this evenin’, y’ understand!” answered Tug. “When he says git I gotted, an’ right smart fast for th’ first three mile, y’ understand!”

“And if I catch him around here, Tug, I promise to throw him out bodily!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I BEGAN to think it never would cease to rain.

Day after day the heavens opened and the lowering black clouds, shouldering each other from hilltop to hilltop, emptied their liquid contents on a flooded earth. Now and then the raging fall winds slipped their leash and came howling out of the north, roaring down upon us in mighty blasts, whipping the great trees until they groaned and whined and bowed their heads in humble submission, driving the rain pelting and hissing against the leaded windows—only to quickly spend their strength and die away again. Day after day it rained, until we had nearly a week of it. Drip, drip, drip splashed the water from the eaves. Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle answered spout and drain.

The lake raised until the water was lapping o'er the soggy meadows. The mighty Hudson swirled brown and angry. Brooks became mad torrents, leaping and foaming noisily on their way. Water stood in the hollows of the fields and trickled in tiny rivulets across the roads. It was so wet that great flocks of ducks and geese forsook the swollen river and alighted to feed in the flooded meadows and grain stubble. Now and then the leaden clouds reached down and enfolded the green hills in a soggy blanket of floating white mist. Then, quite as quickly, they would lift, only to be condensed in the colder altitudes and hurled back to earth in a torrent of huge drops.

A great fire roared up the wide chimney at the Manor house and kept the damp autumnal chill at bay. But, for all this warm and cozy blaze, it was dark and dismal within,

and the minutes lingered and loitered on their way into the past until every hour seemed a full day and every day a lifetime.

In the midst of the adventures of "The Prince of Parthia," there came over me the creepy feeling that I was being watched; that eyes, a multitude of eyes, were looking at me in secret; shiny little black eyes, peering out of dusty cracks and crevices; round, unblinking brown eyes watching from smoothly worn rat holes; large yellow luminous eyes, goggle-wide, round and spookish, staring at my back; blue-green cat eyes; beady bird eyes; and sunken, watery fish eyes—watching, watching!

As though a whole flock of geese was walking o'er my grave my flesh puckered up until it was as rough as a shark skin. Good God, I thought, how lonesome and uncanny an old house can be! I threw down the book and lit more candles, but the invisible eyes seemed only to shrink back a little way into the shadow where they still watched and stared, and this added illumination did not dispel the illusion.

So persistent was this strange impression that I became enraged at mine own folly, angry with an unruly imagination which thus ran riot with my better sense. And just to prove that this was all "nerves," as a result of my being alone in an old house, I jumped up and began a search of the room. I even looked behind all the pictures and moved all the furniture to satisfy myself that there was not so much as a grey mouse or a hoary bat in the room to stare me out of countenance. The portrait of my grandfather, in buff and blue, came down in my hands at a touch as the old cord broke, leaving a clean square on the dirty wall. I was some little time in fixing it and hanging it back in place.

And when I had done so, and turned in disgust to my seat before the fire, a new horror gripped me. At first I seemed to see but a single protruding green eye fixing me as a snake charms a bird with terror—an eye that glowed with hidden green fires, the phosphorescent and unearthly light of fox-fire from damp decay, which sent out piercing cold rays that reached the very brain. But when my heart began again, and startled senses returned slowly to duty, I made out a face, of which this eye was the most conspicuous part,—a large shaggy head with reddish, hairy whiskers hiding a vulture-like neck,—a broken and shrunken spidery form—all ensconced in my easy chair.

“Good God!” I gasped.

The shock was like a sudden and unexpected deluge of ice water on a hot day. My very flesh shrank before it, my startled brain reeled and whirled in mad affright.

At which the apparition in the arm-chair burst out in goulish laughter.

“Ho, ho, ho, ho, hoooo!”

It laughed so loud and long, did this incubus, that its one bright green eye was all but extinguished and tears welled up and out of the red slit where the other green orb had once been set, coursing down a leathery, wrinkled face into the hairy throat covering.

“For a grotesque, or, or a goblin—or a plain ordinary nightmare, you, you—seem to be having an unusually good time,” I stammered, my tongue strangely thick and awkward, as I clutched at the table for support.

“It’s funny—ha-ha-ha—you acted just as scared—ho-ho-hoo—at sight of me—twenty-five years ago,” he croaked.

“Positively you are the first hobgoblin it has ever been my displeasure to see.”

"You don't remember me?" he nodded.

Here he, or it, crossed his, or its, long slim legs before a hunched-up body, big hands over a sharp knee, and peered at me from under a battered hat-brim. If it could be said to exist at all, which I seriously doubted, I would say that it was a little old hunchaback with his chin on his breast, with abnormally long and thin arms and legs, giving him the appearance of being all head and hands. His bony head had but one large greenish eye, and when I looked closer I could see that his face was heavily lined with tiny wrinkles which bespoke a goodly age. His clothes were worn and soiled and of an obsolete pattern. His long tailed coat was bottle-green, with a greasy velvet collar, his breeches were of moleskin. I can assure you that no one ever conjured out of nightmare a more fearsome hobgoblin than this.

"No," said I, "I don't remember you—and I hope I have the pleasure of forgetting this visit as well, which I seriously doubt."

Which set him off in another paroxysm of laughter.

"And would it interrupt your hilarity too much to tell me just why I am honoured by this visit?"

He reached into the tail pocket of his old green coat and brought forth a bunch of keys which he tossed on the table before me.

"That," said he in a bronchial voice, "is why I'm here."

They were the very keys Aunt Abigail had willed me and which the sailor-man had relieved me of on the turn-pike!

"I—I rather hoped I had gotten rid of them for good."

"You'll need 'em," he warned. "Hang on t' 'em."

"Keys," said I, with the gaol in mind, "interest me less just now than ever."

I turned them over in my idle fingers and saw a dark reddish, gummy stain on two of the keys, dropping them with horror.

"Blood!" I gasped.

"Aye," he nodded, "blood. The man who took 'em didn't keep 'em long."

"But, how—you?"

"Never mind," said he. "Now you've got 'em, keep 'em—you'll need 'em."

"But, even with the keyholes I would hardly rate them as an asset in my present reduced circumstances."

"No one," said he, "ever saw a key what didn't have a keyhole—somewhere!"

"Yes, but—now a mislaid keyhole—"

"Go an' find 'em," he advised knowingly, pulling out a long black cigar, such as sailor men smoke, and lighting it with a lucifer. "Go an' find 'em!"

"I've got to find so many things," I sighed; "a wife, money, an honest lawyer, a just court, a way to escape gaol and creditors—so you see I haven't much time to look for mere keyholes."

"All the same thing!" he cried. "All the same thing!"

As I groped for the blood-stained keys on the carpet under the table, glad to escape the evil eye, I answered:

"If you know so much, Mr. Hobgoblin, you might tell me just why grandfather should be so careless with his keyholes."

When I straightened up the chair was quite empty!

"Good God!" I cried again, fully as frightened as I had been when I first found him there.

I jumped up and ran around the room, pushing the furniture about, but never a sign of my strange visitor, noth-

ing but the mysterious keys in my hand to prove that anything or anybody had been there at all!

But the seat of the chair was warm!

That I might get away from such a spookish place I wandered to the old warehouse constructed by Coonraad Van Laar to store his boxes and bales, and, as I well knew, where he rustled contraband between two suns much to the chagrin of the English revenue tax collectors. The barn-like structure set low to the water, fronting on the rotten wharves, its back against the bluff. This rear portion was of stone, evidencing that it had been the original warehouse, added to as the Hollander's questionable business grew, until it was expanded into a great barn, and the stone building remained no more than an office.

Beneath the eaves the brown cliff swallows had plastered their bottle-shaped mud structures, already deserted for winter homes in warmer countries. Inside a half dozen white-faced barn owls fluttered in the shadows, silent, ghoulish, like evil spirits. Across the worn and slivered plank flooring the brown river rats scuttled before me. Here were empty, broken boxes, rusty iron hoops and a litter of mouldy straw. In the old office, with its dusty, webby windows, whereon dead flies dangled in soiled spider snares, I found a few old sticks of furniture—a worn desk, ink spattered and whittled by idle penknives, with mice nests in the drawers, rickety chairs and a fireplace choked with soot and ashes.

And, as I prowled around, picking up bits of paper, kicking over the litter, I dropped my hand into my coat pocket and fell to jingling the mysterious keys. And in this environment of long ago, in the very room where my grandfather was found so sorely stricken after three mys-

terious days' absence, I considered for the first time these interesting keys. I took them out, twirling them on my fingers, in a thoughtful mood.

"Were I making such keys," I mused, "they would be for secret things."

Secret things—ah!

"And were I running contraband past the English revenue collectors I would have need of secret storage right here."

The answer to my mysterious keys was so simple that I laughed aloud—my voice booming in the empty building and setting the owls fluttering to the darkest corners. I did not begin a frenzied search for missing keyholes. That is always the hardest way to find anything. Instead, I sat down on the edge of the old desk and thought somewhat after this fashion:

"Such a secret storage room must necessarily be in the rear, behind that very fireplace, because it could not be made beneath the floors so close to the water level and the river edge. The fireplace looks permanent and real enough, shows no evidence of a secret doorway. But the stairway—ah, the stairway! This stairway went up six steps to a landing, then turned and raised to the floor above.

I stepped over and examined it carefully, blowing the dust from the cracks in the heavy planking. Looking closely I saw that the joints were blind mortises. With one of the keys I forced the dust out of a crack and, quite as easily as though I had done the thing a hundred times before, the flat key dropped into a metal slot, I gave it a turn, and the entire lower part of the stairway swung out, disclosing a yawning black passageway behind it.

I was too surprised to move!

It flashed through my mind that here was where my grandfather had been stricken, where he had laid in the darkness until he found strength to crawl out and never after could speak to tell what had happened. What lay hidden in that darkened interior, whether casks of Jamaica rum, bales of China silk or whatnot, was too much for my curiosity. But I was certain that this explained the mysterious visits of our "ghost." With a box of lucifers in my pocket I struck one and advanced into the brick vaulted tunnel.

In the flaming light of the sulphur match I saw a low vaulted passageway, paved with flagstone, still showing the scars of heavy truck wheels. The walls were damp, spotted and blotched with white mould. The air was heavy and foul. In a few yards I came to a heavy iron-bound door, but one of the keys easily admitted me to a square room. The match burned out and left me in stygian darkness. I struck another and saw that this room had evidently been used as a secret storeroom, but later it had been equipped with a forge, leather bellows and all, the flue going out to the same chimney as the fireplace in the office. But why there should be a forge there, amid a pile of old boxes and sea chests, with no iron mongering to do, unless Vulcan had set up a shop again, I could not imagine until I went closer and lighted a flare.

By the bright yellow splashes on the iron ladles of the forge, when I had blown the dust away, by the very nature of the scattered flasks and moulds, I read the secret of the little Indian gods! For here my grandfather had evidently worked in secret over this charcoal fire melting down a mysterious treasure he had brought from the South Seas.

I fairly trembled with excitement—the mysterious passageway, the secret room, the splash of yellow gold on the

old forge and rusted tools. With an armful of straw and old Japanese rice paper I twisted up a torch and fell to searching the boxes and chests. Beyond a doubt these were the very kegs and boxes in which my grandfather had transported his treasure. The seven little Indian gods, inherited from Aunt Abigail, were but a sample of the treasure—probably Inca or Aztec gold filched from some old sunken Spanish galleon.

But, I might have known, there was no gold for me in this underground chamber—I who needed gold so badly! And the passageway beyond led to no more secret chambers, merely a narrow tunnel which sloped ever upward and ended in a little pocket beside the fireplace in the living room of the Manor house. Here another key admitted me to my home.

In my own house again I brushed the cobwebs and dust from my clothes, now sadly wrinkled and soiled, and in doing so remembered the sea sketch in a foreign hand. It was as clear as air! This was a rude map of the very place where my grandfather had fished up his treasure. But, unintelligible as it was—and so far away—it was of little value to me with November and disaster just ahead. But now I began to understand why those old sea dogs had robbed me so often, and done murder among themselves, all for a bit of ink-scratched paper and a bunch of keys. Now I knew the secret of the mutilated hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY

IN the tap-room Tjerck polished bar and glasses and juggled his bottles, while the four card players in the corner played silently and sullenly at their endless game. I was waiting for the daily mail, hoping against hope, that it would bring me good news, when in shambled Old Jot, nearly concealed in the clinging folds of a brown storm cloak and cape.

"How the *tegenwind* she do blow, Jot," greeted Tjerck.

"Ha, ha, ha, a new hand at th' bellows, Tjerck," chuckled Jot. "A new hand at th' bellows."

"Poof! I dought you said id would clear ups by noons."

"Thet's right, Tjerck, thet's right," quavered Jot. "Fling an old man's failin's in his teeth, Tjerck."

"*Hm!* Int your teeth?" grinned Tjerck.

"In m' face then!" snorted Jot. "Ye know right well I ain't got it no teeth; they be gone, like everything else, Tjerck."

"*Ja!* Ve all gets dot vay zooner nor later, Jot. Vy yesterday I vas so blindt I dakes id int a plugged York shilling—*Got!*"

"It must a-been plugged mighty nice, Tjerck," grinned Jot.

"You dinks it vill stop rainings, Jot?"

"It always does, Tjerck!"

Tjerck ran this phrase over in his mind, unable to fathom its depth.

"*Ja!* dots so," he grunted. "It always does, don't id?"

And, as Jot said, in the end the black clouds grew a lighter tint and at this first sign of weakness the whistling winds sprang up and rolled them quick asunder, sending them scurrying away behind the eastern horizon so that the bright October sun again looked down upon the wretched, cold and bedraggled earth.

And as soon as the sun had dried the grass I set out for Mother Martha's.

Always you will find the primal forest to reflect indigenous moods and fancies; always you will find the parental wood in full accord and sympathy with your subconscious self and innermost feelings. For the forest, and these personal affections, are of the Beginning and hold communion through hidden senses and mysterious vibrations, as a mother speaks understandingly to a child not yet old enough to know words.

On melancholy days, when all seems hopeless and desperate, the shadows beneath the trees will thicken, phantom shapes, seen only from the corner of the eye, will dog you down the haunted tree lanes and eerie voices, plain enough to the inner ear, will call and jeer at you. The wood, moaning and complaining, is a place of sadness and gloom, an ill-omened, threatening place of dead and dying and decaying things. But, in your gayer moments, should you walk that way, the forest will take on a great happiness, from the warm sunshine softly filtering through the leaves, to the glad carolling of many birds, the whispering of the contented trees, the smell of spicy wood, and the endless flower-spangled carpet of green and brown underfoot.

So now, to bear me out in this, as I strode beneath the trees toward the cabin, threatened by the future (and God knows what else!), thinking, in a black mood, of the

evil before me, the forest spoke to me in its dumb way, faithfully transmitting to my subconscious senses, in some unknown manner, a warning grim and dire.

It is beyond the power of words to tell just why I hesitated and stopped; why I stood there beneath the naked trees; listening, hearing nothing; searching the thick coppice of scrubby balsam firs before me—seeing nothing; trying to understand, and yet warned as truly, as sincerely, as though some one shouted in my ears of grave danger just ahead. It was as though youth through a magic crystal saw death lurking there in the inky shadows before me. There beat upon my brain a warning, a sense of something amiss.

There was not the slightest material thing to intimate that there was actual danger near. There was not the slightest reason why I should be afraid to pass the coppice. I called myself a fool and a coward, but when I stepped bravely ahead a jagged branch caught at my coat and pulled me back, a thorn-apple twig tore at my breeches. I swore and disentangled myself, and started again, tripping over a stick. It was as though old Mother Wood was trying thus to hold me back! Suddenly I sensed, rather than knew, that the forest was still, deathly still! Lonely and desolate it was, dismal and dire. Bird nor beast nor insect made so much as a scratching on tree trunk or the faintest rustle in the dead leaves. The trees did not whisper—not a twig stirred. Fear took hold of me and shook my flesh as my senses awakened to the fact that there in the coppice death awaited.

I whirled to run as from a stalking tiger-cat about to spring and something tore at my breast, like an invisible hand clutching at my life, whirling me half around and to my ears came a deafening crash that was very like

a blow on the bare skull. I tore away from the spot, where thousands of silk threads seemed to bind me, and ran down a steep embankment red with ginseng berries, leaping a dry brook paved with grey stones and dashed away into the deeper wood beyond, crashing through the brush like a wounded buck, not even knowing whether I was hurt or not. On, on, I raced, aimlessly, in a panic of fear, to escape this terrible thing called Death.

When quite out of breath, my senses returning, I leaned, weak and sickly faint, against a white birch and looked where the bony hand of Death had clutched at me and missed, I saw that a rifle ball had passed through my clothes without breaking the skin, tearing coat, waistcoat and shirt.

The King of Terrors was lurking in the wood. He had struck at me—and missed! The friendly trees had warned me just in time and when I looked up to voice my thanks I saw that they were now waving their wide arms gleefully and in a low whispering were rejoicing at my escape. And so I clutched at the great, shaggy white birch and laid my hot cheek against its cool, clean bark and in shaking, gasping breath gave them thanks.

By another, and a longer route, I continued to Mother Martha's. And the sunshine came flooding back into my heart also, dispelling the darkness of Doubt and Fear, when again I found Ronella and stood with her beside the lake watching the small fry hunting in the shallows among the dead and dying rushes.

"Those days alone in the Manor house were like so many years in prison, Ronella," said I.

"There were black clouds at Oakwood also," said she with bowed head.

"And there was a mighty storm within mine own heart, Ronella!"

She looked up at me with a wan little smile.

"But now the sun shines, Barent Creighton!"

"Ah, yes, the sun shines now!"

This day she wore a soft, white woollen shawl draped across her broad shoulders, because the air was sharp with the first cold breath of winter which ever blows hard upon the heels of autumn rain. And this snowy mantle served as a background to enhance and glorify the wondrous beauty of her dark, wavy hair, and brought out the soft play of opalescent colours in her white face and neck. And when she laughed, looking roguishly up into my eyes, her cheeks grew ever redder and her teeth glistened like the ivory finger keys of a harpsichord.

"When do you marry your acres?" she teased.

"Never, I hope."

"You have had favourable news from New York?" she questioned.

"Not the slightest—but I look for it every day."

"Then there is hope for you after all, sir!"

"Why, yes—a little, making about as much noise as a newly hatched humming bird."

She was looking at me very anxiously. Suddenly she turned very white and wide eyed, clutching at my arm.


"Barent, your coat!" she cried in alarm.

"Oh, yes; my coat! Truly 't is a shameful thing. But the only coat I have."

"But it is—something has happened it!"

"Yes, to be sure, much has happened it. There my pipe overturned and here Tjerck spilled some coffee—"

"There, on the breast!"



"It got torn—today—in the wood. With so many holes I didn't think any one would notice a new one."

"And waistcoat!"

"Marred somewhat, at the same time."

"You have been fighting."

"No," I owned frankly, "I ran like a coward."

"Who, who—" But she could not finish the question.

"I don't know—I didn't see the fellow."

"You have enemies here. You must—"

"An enemy—singular number. Probably the best and most efficient enemy mortal ever had."

"Some one shot at you!"

"Yes, I seem to have a charmed life—or the Fates are saving me for the debtor's prison."

"You must not come here any more."

"Surely, as trustee of this estate," I began.

"Then I shall not come here again."

"I do not believe—it is—because of you—that some one shot at me today," I explained. "This little hole," I ran a finger through my torn coat, "is the first actual evidence I have had that I may yet succeed."

We walked along for some little distance before she spoke again, and she was thinking of my business troubles and difficulties.

"I wish that you might succeed, Barent Creighton."

"Without marrying my acres?"

She sighed as we walked slowly down the shore to the edge of the wood where a hollow beech had blown down so that its top rested in the water and its trunk formed a comfortable rustic seat. Here we sat down, side by side, and stared at the mirrored water.

A bunch of yellow legged snipe, belated on their southern flight, were nervously darting about in short circles, cry-

ing noisily, eager to be on their way to the tropics for the winter. In the centre of the lake a little flock of wild ducks, with nodding coppery heads, played and splashed in the water.

"Barent," said she after a while, "do you realize that November will soon be here?"

"Yes," said I, striking the fallen leaves with my stick. "It will soon be here."

"And,—and after that, Barent?"

"It will certainly be December," I smiled.

"But, but what of you, Barent?"

"I shall have my choice of three things," said I, "not one of which have I any desire or inclination to choose. The first is a debtor's dungeon in the Hall of Justice, the second is the emigrant route to the great west and another chance at life and the third is the tide-rip through Hell Gate."

"Is there no other way?"

"Why, yes, come to think of it I can always marry my acres!"

"Oh," said she.

"And there is always hope," said I. "I have had no word from New York for several days and know not how things are faring down there. Vrooman, Bellinger and Foster are working with our attorneys, fighting our case in the United States Supreme Court, but I have little hope of victory after so many disastrous battles in the courts. In the business world the devil often triumphs."

"But you cannot go to gaol, sir!" she declared, seizing me anxiously by the arm.

"I shall not," I smiled grimly.

"Neither can you—oh, Barent, you would not take your own life!"

"That were better than the dungeon-keep, Ronella."

"You, you can go—west, sir."

"In disgrace?"

"But there you can redeem yourself and repay the money you have lost."

"But not until my friends were ruined. It would take years and years."

"Then you *must* marry your acres, Barent," this as though she was deciding for me.

"Yes," said I, slowly and with great difficulty, "I *must* marry my acres."

"And soon, Barent."

"Just as soon as the woman agrees to it."

"Oh!" she cried in surprise, "so the woman has been found."

"Yes," said I, "she has been found."

She quickly turned her head aside and gazed out over the lake to the other shore where the sentinel spruces leaned far out over the water from their secure anchorage in the rocks. Her cheeks paled and I thought I saw her lip tremble ever so little.

"Who—who is the woman, Barent?" she asked slowly and in a strange voice, nor could I understand the moist look in her eyes. "Who, who is she?"

For answer I slipped down upon my knee at her feet, my arm around her, and laid my hot forehead against her trembling arm.

"'T is—'t is you, Ronella!" I answered. "You are the one and only woman!"

It seemed an age before I heard her voice again and in the meantime my lips were dumb, my mind awlirl, my very body numb and nerveless.

"Barent!" she cried, catching my hot face in her

tense fingers and looking anxiously, imploringly into my eyes, "Oh, Barent Creighton!"

Swiftly, tightly I encircled her in my arms and held her close.

"And, oh, Ronella! loving you as I do, I cannot marry any one else for all the land outdoors—not even to save my friends!"

But she only shook her head slowly in the negative, sparing me the hard words. And when I looked into her face I saw that she was weeping silently.

"Barent, please take me home," she asked in a subdued voice, jumping up, and then it was I knew for a certainty that she did not love me.

"Come," said I in what voice I could muster, "we will go home."

And, as I walked along with bowed head, she followed meekly by my side, her drooping lashes almost touching her wet cheeks, her soft eyes fixed on the ground. I knew that her heart was filled with sadness and with pity because she had hurt me and this knowledge stung until rising anger came surging and sweeping forward, driving sadness and misery before it. And, as I walked along, with knotted fists and clenched teeth, my ears caught again the measured beat of leathery wing-tips and above all shrieked and howled the eerie laughter of Despair.

"Barent—oh, Barent!" cried she in alarm. "Do you realize that this, this is the end—of everything?"

"According to Elder Russell the end of everything is not until the first Sunday in November—and I guess he is quite right so far as I am concerned."

And so, with Despair shrieking in my ears, came we to the edge of the wood with the soft blue dusk of evening creeping down from the golden crowned hill.

“Goodnight—Ronella,” said I in a strange voice.

Then it was I saw that she could not speak, but her soft white arm stole boldly up and around my neck and long after she had gone there was a splash of moisture, a tiny sparkling droplet on my hand!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"Oh, it's all to you
And it's nothin' to me,
But sich darned actions
I don't like to see."

I LOOKED up to see from whence came this familiar bit of doggerel and there beside the road was Jolly Jack Rogers, sitting comfortably on his leather tool bag, smoking his little black clay pipe.

"Hello, Jolly Jack," I greeted.

"Hello yourself," he twinkled.

"Business must be slack again," I ventured.

"Well, I jest took on quite a job at th' Hartwells'."

"Ah," I exclaimed, "so you have been to Oakwood, Jack."

"It were a rare bit o' work I picked up there, sir," he nodded. "Oh, as rich a job 's ever I had, sir, in any one place. Two pair o' fine ridin' boots fer th' Lord o' th' Manor himself, sir, with sewed welt soles an' light calf vamps; an' six pairs o' work boots for th' hired help." He tolled them off on his stubby fingers. "Two pairs o' morocco slippers an' two pairs o' split calf shoes fer his handsome darter—"

"Ronella!" I sighed.

"Well, all I got t' say is, one's puddin' cools fast when he's not there t' eat it."

"Oh," said I.

"There's another feller, sir," he explained.

"John Bevens?" I asked.

"Th' werry same," he nodded. "John Bevens is his name an' I spotted him fer a villun th' minute I claps eyes on him, sir. It's a way I have, sir, an' I kin spot a villun, sir, as fur 's ten rod an' an ell."

"He is a villain, Jack."

"I knowed it!" he cried. "I knowed it first time I claps my orbs on him, sir. An' it wus so I tells th' young lady herself, sir, when I wus a-measurin' o' her purty leetle foot. Jest like a fairy's it were, small an' slender an' arched like a bow, sir. An I says t' her, says I: 'Take keer, young lady, thet man who smiles s' lovely an' looks s' hifalutin', he's a villun, mark my word.' But, would you believe it, sir? she only laffed—laffed uncommon loud an' long, sir."

"I can very well believe it, Jack," I answered, "she did the same when I told her."

"An' he 's a villun too," affirmed Jack, "didn't I hear him a-plottin an' a-dickerin' with Hartwell?"

"Tell me about it, Jack."

"Well, not thet I'd listen t' private words, sir, but bein's how I wus so anxious t' prove th' feller wus a villun, I didn't plug my ears none, n' this 's what I hears:—

"'We must be married at once,' says this Bevens.

"'Must is a strong word!' roars Hartwell.

"'Necessity is a hard master,' says Bevens.

"'Then win her, John,' answers Hartwell, jest like that. 'You got my consent, John,' says he real loud, slapping Bevens on th' back. 'Jest ye go ahead man, an' get her. I can't throw this race, John, an' you must step along to win. Dash my eye!'"

"Did he say, 'Dash my eye,' Jack?" I laughed.

"He did, more'n a hundred times," grinned Jack.

"And what else, Jack?"

“‘I want you to force her hand a bit,’ urged this villain.

“‘Force nothing, John!’ roars Hartwell. ‘I tried that once, John, an’ it won’t go. No, dash my eye! Didn’t go for a copper cent, John. You got to drive that filly without th’ whip, John, or she’ll run away an’ ditch th’ both of us.’

“‘But she won’t marry me!’ says John, kinda threatening like.

“‘Tut! tut! Hellitihoot, John!’ laughs Hartwell. ‘Why, a handsome, dashing fellow like you, John, rich an’ powerful, ought not to have a bit of trouble.’

“‘But she keeps putting me off,’ argues John.

“‘One must carry hearts by storm, John, and not try to starve them out,’ says he.”

Jolly Jack was an excellent story teller and mimic. He seemed to remember every word, actually telling it with the inflections of voice and gestures of both speakers.

“Bevens stood for quite a spell, flickin’ his ridin’ whip agin his boot an’ lookin’ mighty cross an’ ugly. Finally he says, says he:

“‘This marriage must take place at once.’

“‘Must is a strong word, John!’ bellows Hartwell! ‘Must is a damn strong word. Dash my eye, sir, if it isn’t!’

“‘Must!’ repeated John Bevens, lookin’ him straight in th’ eye. ‘Must, or I will know the reason why.’

“‘What in thunder do you mean, John?’ bawls Hartwell in surprise. ‘Now what in thunder do you mean? Dash my eye, sir!’

“‘I mean that unless this marriage takes place at once we are both ruined,’ answers Bevens very slowly and calmly.

"'Ruined!' cried Hartwell.

"'Not so loud!' hissed Bevens.

"'Why, John, why—'

"'As flat as a flounder,' answered th' villun. 'I need the prestige of this marriage to keep my head above water. Unless it takes place at once I will be in a mighty deep hole an' if I fall you fall, if I lose you will lose.'

"'An', I tell y' young feller, thet fairly floored th' old man, so it did. Knocked him flat 's a stave, sir. Dashed him in his own eye, sir! I peeks out an' I sees him reel an' turn fairly white, sir. Yes, he did! Then this villun catches Hartwell by th' arm an' he explains how it wus in a cool, calm voice. It seems he needs money, an' plenty o' it. He has borried about all he can, an' th' stock market's run agin him like th' devil. If he marries Hartwell's darter he can borry all he wants, an' then he can save himself, an' Hartwell too. Hartwell has invested all his money in Bevens' schemes so he needs this marriage 'jest as badly as Bevens does."

"I would not be surprised if it were true," said I. "Luck runs both ways, Jack."

"It do," said he. "It runs up an' it runs down, it runs in an' it runs out, it runs flood an' it runs ebb, sir. An' so they stands there 'fore my winder an' fixes it all up thet Hartwell will urge his darter t' marry this villun."

I caught my breath sharply at this dire suggestion.

"Anyway, as I said a-fore, sir," he continued, "one's puddin' cools mighty fast when you're not there t' eat it."

It flashed through my mind that all this had taken place several days ago and now I could understand why Ronella must deny any affection for me, even if such a thing did exist in her heart.

She, too, must marry for money!

Jolly Jack shouldered his leather bag and shuffled away up the road while I turned and walked slowly to the village, my brain in a whirl of thought.

The drink I ordered at the tavern bar was such as a man will take when grief gnaws at his heart and sadness sits like a weight of lead upon his brow. As I raised the brimming glass with unsteady hand Tjerck heaved a mighty sigh, like a blast from a bellows, and filled another for himself from the same squat bottle.

"*Helaas!* I drinks mid sorrows mijnsel," groaned Tjerck and I noted, as he sat down the empty glass, that his usually round and jovial face was drawn into heavy lines and the corners of his huge mouth drooped sadly.

"Why, Tjerck!" I cried in surprise. "What has gone wrong now?"

"*Ach!* efferydings," he sighed, winking hard, and two large tears were forced out of the corners of his little blue eyes and coursed down his heavy, mottled cheeks. "Efferydings, Mr. Creighton, M'-m'-mijn hired girl has vent—*O mijn God!*"

"What, the treasure, Tjerck?"

"M-m-married," he fairly blubbered. "*Mijne werkmeid* vas gone!"

"Not married!" I cried aghast, remembering that she was the Homeliest Woman in the World.

"M-m-married," nodded Tjerck, his coppery nose twitching. "As true 's I be stoodt here. Gone! Took away, by—" (here followed some Dutch jargon unintelligible to me, but no doubt amply expressive) "—by dot oldt fool, Sylvester Schelmandine of Kubble Hill vay."

"Whatever made him do it, Tjerck?" I asked.

"*Ha*, he, he didn't have to do id, Mr. Creighton," blub-

"Goodnight—Ronella," said I in a strange voice.

Then it was I saw that she could not speak, but soft white arm stole boldly up and around my neck ; long after she had gone there was a splash of moisture tiny sparkling droplet on my hand!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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whatever you please with him—providing there is anything left for you to work on. But, until I have settled my account in full, you must not come between us, Martinus.”

“Then you better hurry,” grinned my friend, “I am feeling stronger every day!”

We walked along the pleasant highway in silence and I fell a-thinking of this great mystery of the world whereby a man, be he bold and dangerous enough, can sail directly contrariwise to life’s currents, as John Bevens did.

“Martinus, suppose *The Badger* does not win our case?”

“Then I shall take the first canal packet out of Albany for the west. There I can build another fortune and send for Zara. I have done nothing criminal. I shall do my best to repay those who lose by my counsel and advice and I suggest that you get ready to go along with me, Barent.”

“But wouldn’t it be cowardly to run?”

“No, we would be fools to stay. Putting us in gaol will not give them back their money. Let them blame John Bevens—where the blame rightfully belongs.”

“But, Martinus, I cannot bear to think of being a failure.”

“One lost battle does not always make a failure of a man.”

“I know, but a lost campaign does!”

Arguing thus about this strange thing in the hazard of life called Luck we came to the tangled yard before the Manor house. The wind sighed through the tops of the solemn cedars and for the first time no rabbit raced away through the thick brush, no grouse boomed up from underfoot. We came down the old weed grown walk side by side, Martinus carrying a heavy staff to assist him in walking, being somewhat weak from his recent wound, and I with my empty hands clasped behind my back. As we

passed a mass of syringa bushes, grown about with burdock and wild morning glory, there was a sudden crash of trampled brush, a wild yell, an oath or two and five men fell upon us.

"At 'em, buckos—at 'em!"

me

There was scarcely time for Martinus and I to whirl about and put our backs together. Clad in rough disguises of figured calico and turkey feathers, with faces daubed with bright colours by way of disguise, I thought at first they were Anti-renters, perhaps my own tenants, to treat me to a coat of tar and feathers. But their cries and oaths were of the waterfront and the docks, and it was all too evident that the ruffians, as so often happened, meant to cover their evil purpose with the Anti-rent disguise.

"Quick with 'em, mates—quick with 'em!" cried the leader hoarsely.

Martinus was an expert with either sabre or singlestick and already his staff was whistling about his head, parrying, thrusting, meeting blow with blow. But, as for me, I was without weapon of any kind and must meet knife and bludgeon with my fists and feet.

I sent one dock-rat staggering back with a blow upon his jaw—dodged a club and kicked another heavily in the groin. I heard Martinus cry—something crunched under his stick. Again I saw the blurred flash of his staff as it swung back and warded off a blow aimed at my head. Instantly the assailants charged home, four to two now and in a tangled melee we staggered back and forth over the weed grown lawn, striking, kicking, taking and giving good blows. In that few minutes while we were both fresh we managed to give a good account of ourselves but Martinus was still weak from the bed and stiff in his right

shoulder and we were hopelessly outnumbered by men who well knew the deadly work they had in hand.

It was but a matter of a minute or two longer when above the din of battle rang a piercing, nerve tightening scream—and then another! It was like unto nothing upon the earth—nothing that mortal ever heard before. The dock-rats shrank back before it, terrorized. Ear-splitting this fiend's voice rose and fell in piercing, quavering high notes, seeming to search the very ends of the earth, tossing back and forth from hill to hill. I jerked my head around and there upon the porch of the old Manor house stood poor Crazy Mary, her hands up to her gaunt face, screaming frantically, as she watched the murder being done before her eyes.

But the hired rascals were not dismayed when they saw that it was only a poor old hag. They were paid to perform a certain job and they meant to earn their gold. And, doubtless, but for a new terror they would have accomplished their heinous purpose. But, as they closed upon us, the screams were answered by a strange, roaring cry.

"Thou shalt not kill!" It was like the voice of Joshua roaring down from the skies. "Thou shalt not kill!"

And around the corner of the house, trampling the weeds, charged the aged circuit rider, hair and beard streaming. "As Abishaai smote the Philistines and killed them so is my arm raised against these vermin!"

Using the old horse-pistol as a flail he laid about him with a long arm and a heavy hand, shouting biblical proverbs, his hair and beard tossing like sea foam, his dark eyes ablaze with a fanatic glow.

"An eye for an eye—smite Amnon, then kill him—"

The old pistol crashed down upon a man's head, so that

the fellow collapsed as though his bones had turned suddenly to jelly, and the others, terrorized by the old fanatic, took to their heels and vanished in the brush.

"It was warm work," said I, "and the rascals handed me a few bruises."

"We're lucky not to have a knife in our vitals," panted Martinus.

"Mother of God!" groaned The Elder. "Such devil's work! With the end of the world but a few days away, when all will be killed as one man, and men too impatient to wait."

"I guess it's the end for this fellow."

I bent over the man The Elder had felled and found that his head was badly battered and crushed until there was small hope of his recovery. With a hat full of water from the lake I bathed his face and washed the wound until the stimulating effect of the cold water brought back his numbed senses.

"Who sent you here?" I asked.

"Aw-aw-go t' ell," he answered sullenly. "You'll get nothin' out o' me—"

"Did John Bevens pay you for this?"

"Aw-go—go—"

But his thick lips only moved in an attempt to frame the profane words, he smiled in a weak and twisted way and closed his hard eyes with a weary smile, never to open them again. I went through his pockets carefully, hoping to throw some light on the mystery, and found a cheap pipe and some tobacco in a blue paper, a worn clasp knife, a good watch, a lottery ticket and a number of odds and ends. There was but one thing to give a hint of his employer and this was a bit of paper with an address scribbled thereon in bluish ink.

"Number 210 Pearl Street," exclaimed Martinus; "that is where John Bevens keeps his Spanish mistress."

"And it is in Bevens' handwriting, even if he did try to disguise it," I added. "But this is no proof—none at all."

"It settles one thing, Barent," declared Martinus, "and that is you must not stay here alone another night."

But I only laughed at Martinus' timidity in my behalf.

"This is my home," said I, "and here I stay until this sorry business is o'er."

The old Circuit Rider had dropped to his knees, praying beside the man he had slain.

"I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal," chanted he. "Who shall kill shall be in danger of judgment, for wrath destroyeth the foolish man. My hands are red, red!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“PLEASE—please!” More of a command than entreaty, for all her choice of words. “Please, Mr. Creighton, let us be good friends.”

“And no more than good friends, Ronella?”

“I am afraid not, Mr. Creighton.”

“Mr. Creighton sounds so cold and formal, Ronella!” I protested.

“Barent, then,” she smiled.

“You are not sorry that I came?”

“No-o-o.”

“And you will not mind if I stay a little while if, if I behave more like—a friend, Ronella?”

“No-o-o.”

I sat down on the shelving rock by her side and stared out at the shimmering lakelet, for it is hard, oh, so very hard, for a young man to behave like a friend when—oh, when his heart is singing so loudly!

“Ronella,” smiled I, “what manner of friendly guise shall I assume?”

“Oh, be a good confidential friend, Barent!”

“I have nothing to confide but my admiration, Ronella,” I sighed. “And you make it mighty hard for me to be good.”

Her gaze was fixed upon the water and the little wrinkle between her brows attested that she was thinking very hard and seriously. Autumn had laid its cold kiss upon her cheeks, bringing to the surface the red fires of health and youth which ever glowed beneath the transparent

skin. A soft breeze plucked at the dainty lace about her white throat and played with the curling ringlets of her hair. Her dark, ever mysterious eyes were half closed, as though to exclude all distracting things while mighty problems were being worked out and solved within.

"It's awfully serious business," I sighed loudly, "trying to be just good friends!"

"I was wondering how you came by that bruise upon your cheek?"

I looked down at my torn knuckles and answered with a laugh.

"I met a man from New York—"

"Oh," said she.

"—with my fist, and he gave me that bruise in an exchange of courtesies."

"Not Mr. Bevens?" she exclaimed.

"Not *yet!*" said I slowly, noting her sudden interest with heightening anger. "But, I hope, soon!"

"Oh," said she, "you have been fighting again."

"Again and over nothing—as usual," I nodded, "nothing but my life."

"Do you then count that as nothing?"

"Little enough, surely."

"And what, may I ask, are you going to do with it?"

"Live it," I laughed, "till my dying day."

"You make a jest of everything," she frowned. "Is there nothing serious?"

"Aye," with a laugh, "never had man more serious purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To get married."

"Oh," said she, "so you can get the money you want."

"So I can get the woman I want."

Whereupon she blushed prettily enough and turned her face away.

"Not but that a little money makes matrimony even more pleasant to contemplate," I explained. "Especially when a man—"

"I always planned to marry a poor man," said she absently.

"You will never have such another opportunity," I sighed.

"But now I guess I, too, will have to marry for money."

"That," said I, "makes my task even harder."

"It, it is always difficult to keep the path of duty."

"The west," said I, "is a big place, where one does not even need money, nor is it necessary to get married to acquire title to more land than both these Manors."

"But, but this is home!"

"'Home,' " said I, "'is where the heart is.' "

She was silent for some little time and when she spoke I hardly recognized her voice, so strained and hoarse was it.

"I am glad that you have come, Barent, and sorry—too!"

"But why the sorry part, Ronella?"

"Because—because, today we must say—good-bye, Barent."

"No, not good-bye!" I cried as I sprang up in affright, sensing for the first the full meaning of her words. "Not today!"

"It, it must be," she answered slowly, staring down at the red leaves washed up against the shore. "For ever!"

My body went suddenly numb, myriad lights danced before my misty eyes, the lake up-tilted and rocked like a

cheval-glass as I fairly staggered on my feet. With an effort I controlled myself and walked a few paces away so that she could not see my twitching face. At the edge of the water I stood, where the wavelets whispered at the shore, my hands clasped behind me, gazing out at the shimmering lake and the flaming hills, but seeing them not. For ages and ages men have stood thusly, and will stand for time to come, so that with sinking heart and misty eyes they might turn a smiling face towards the world.

"Ronella," I turned to her with a smile, "I am not afraid of what the future will bring."

"You are very brave—in all things—Barent Creighton."

"I trust that I may be brave enough to say good-bye—if ever I have to, Ronella."

"I like that smile upon your lips."

"Lips are made for smiles—and, and kisses, love."

"And for pleasant words, Barent."

"Then how can you ever say good-bye, Ronella?"

"Because, because I must!"

All the distance from the chestnut tree to Mother Martha's cabin I kept the smile upon my lips—a lying smile which could not ease the dull ache in my breast. But her soft hand was upon my arm, tightening as though bidding me be brave, and, and the smile stayed upon my lips!

"I should not have come here today—never again—only, only, I could not go without seeing you."

"Go where?" I asked in alarm.

"Away," said she so low I could scarce hear the words. "To New York."

"My, my, what a fine couple," greeted Mother Martha

from the doorway. "I've lived a long, long time and have seen many and many a young couple walking out, but never such a handsome one as this."

"Your eyesight is getting dim, Mother," laughed Ronella. "The less one can see the more beautiful everything seems."

"Aye, to be sure," nodded the old dame.

"Mine is but reflected beauty, Mother," said I.

"A pretty compliment, young sir!" cried Mother Martha. "As pretty a compliment as ever was turned."

"And but a compliment after all, Mother," blushed Ronella.

"You are a witch, Mother," said I.

"Oh,—ha, ha, ha, haaa! I am wise with wisdom that cometh with years, young sir, and a witch for knowing what is going on before my very eyes. Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

And with her chuckling laughter ringing in our ears we passed on toward the red and gold forest where we entered the old woodroad now buried beneath the fallen foliage. Nearly half a foot of bright leaves lay under the trees like a thick Oriental rug of brilliant colours woven into strange patterns by the varying winds. With every puff of air the gaudy leaves above loosened their grip on the twigs and came floating down, sparkling in the air, raining to earth.

"Something tells me that it will not be for ever, Ronella."

"I am afraid that it must be—for ever."

As we passed a low hanging maple I struck the branches with my stick so that the bright leaves showered down upon us. Leaves of gold and leaves of scarlet rained down, catching in her hair, in her dress, into her open hands.

"I still have faith in my future, Ronella."

"I hope you will have a very brilliant future, Barent Creighton!"

"It will be empty without you, Ronella."

She looked up at me in surprise, but did not answer, and in silence we walked on through the wood.

"And so, Ronella," I mused thoughtfully as we walked along. "And so you are determined to marry this, this John Bevens?"

"Yes," she answered softly, staring down at the brown stubble. "I have quite made up my mind."

"And do you love him, Ronella?"

"My father very dearly desires it," she added slowly.

"Has he told you why?"

"Yes," she bowed her fine head. "Yes, the whole horrible story. I can save him—save our home, if I will—and I will."

"And John Bevens too," I blurted out.

"I was not aware that Mr. Bevens needed any help," she retorted, searching me with questioning eyes.

"Ah, but he does. A marriage with the Hartwell family will re-establish his worn credit which is already strained to the breaking point."

"You do not understand," said she, smiling at me in sympathy.

"No, I do not understand," I admitted.

"It, it is something like marrying your acres," she explained.

"Any one is a scoundrel who will marry for money," I began, in mock seriousness.

Her cheeks began to flame.

"What woman of spirit would stand for being bartered off."

Her cheeks were even redder.

"Like a fat pig—for a few acres of land.'"

"You, you are very unkind, sir," she managed to say. "And, and rude."

"Once, you rebelled against your father's orders."

"But this time he does not command—he is begging me to save him, to save us and our home."

"Ronella, do not delude yourself," I cautioned. "You cannot save your father by marrying John Bevens. Come what may Bevens will never return your father's gold."

"You have," she hesitated, "a similar duty before you."

"It will soon be behind me," I answered sullenly.

"But what of your future?"

"I don't seem to have any."

"And your friends?"

"They will be poorer and wiser, but otherwise no worse off."

"Have you then, no pride, sir?"

"Enough not to make a complete fool of myself, I hope."

And so, debating the subject, came we to the edge of the wood. Ronella stopped, head bowed, hands clasped before her, looking very wan and serious.

"Here we must say good-bye, Barent."

"I will go with you to Oakwood."

"No."

"As far as the bridge?"

"No," she answered slowly, "we will part here."

Now came upon me a great confusion, a hurly-burly of wild thought and rough action, wherein I hardly knew what I did and less of what was said. I seem to remember, as of an evil dream, that I held her struggling in my arms and cried out that I would never give her up. And she

struck me in the face, again and again, and on my numb ears beat her words hissing with anger: "I hate you—I hate you!"

With the sharp sting of a blow that cut my lip I seemed for the first to realize what I was doing, knew that all this was folly and that I must lose her for ever.

I tried to speak, but could make no sound, a strange force seizing upon my throat and choking me. My tongue refused to lend itself to words and my lips twitched with emotion, but framed no sentence. I turned away from her, too overcome to even look at her, and threw myself face downward against the leaf covered bank behind us beneath the naked trees. How long I lay there I do not know, for my mind was a chaos of thought, but long after I thought she had gone Ronella came and kneeled down beside me, her hand upon my shaggy red head.

"Barent," she whispered. "Oh, Barent Creighton!"

But I could not answer, could not even look at her.

"There are tears in my eyes, Barent!"

And still I could not speak.

"And oh! my heart is so heavy, Barent!" she pleaded.

"And I am sorry!"

Sorry!

The word was like a stinging whiplash to my flesh, like a searing flame to my brain.

Sorry for me!

The word stung me to action and I sprang angrily to my feet, while she knelt there in the flaming leaves, her hands clenched to her heaving breast.

"I do not ask for sympathy!" I cried hoarsely. "I do not want you to feel sorry for me. Keep your sympathy and your sorrow, you will have bitter need of both."

"Barent!" she cried in alarm, getting slowly to her feet. "Barent—oh, how could you!"

She shamed me with a look and strode angrily away, head high and hands clenched, and did not even turn to look at me and when I saw that she was going home, going out of my life for ever, I cried out and ran after her.

"Ronella, Ronella, I shall *never* give you up!"

But she only ran on the faster and then I knew in truth the bitterness of her hatred.

With whistling wing beat and rattling scales came winging up Despair. I seized my hat and stick and hurried away through the wood with the monster flapping along behind, now and then leering over my shoulder to screech his nonsense into my unwilling ear.

"Fool of fools! Would you waste your precious life and love upon a woman who wants another? There are others—ah, others quite as fine—and new ones coming along every year."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"IT looks like rain," remarked The Elder from the back of his nodding old white nag as he anxiously scanned the lowering heavens, his white hair and beard tossing in the puffs of cold wind that preceded the storm.

"It will be a black night," I answered from the sagging gatepost, puffing my pipe. "Black, and wet and cold."

"A wet and fearsome night to be out o' doors," sighed he.

"Any one would be foolish to stay out when I have so much house and so little company."

"There is that neither day or night seeketh sleep," he sighed.

"I don't insist on your sleeping," I laughed.

He looked at me long and earnestly.

"Is that an invitation?" he asked eagerly.

"It is," said I. "If you don't mind a haunted house?"

"Haunted?"

"Ghosts and whatnot," I nodded.

"Foolishness!" he snorted.

"I have an extra bed."

"What matters where one sleeps when there are but a few more days before the long eternal night for all the world?"

"Let us not sup with sorrow because of that."

But this suggestion only seemed to spur him into a fine frenzy.

"Young man," he cried, "take heed, be warned, the end of the world is near."

"The end is very near—for me!" I laughed.

"They will not heed; oh God, they will not listen!" he cried fervently. "As it was in the days of Noah so it is now, only a thousand times worse. As the prophets of Samaria prophesied in Baal, so I cry out in vain," he raised his shaking hands to the threatening skies. "God bear witness, on the first Sunday of next month this world of sin and beastliness, of evil and corruption, will drop into the flaming sun in a blaze of hell-fire and there in the smoking lakes of boiling pitch and brimstone the ungodly and unrepentant ones shall burn for ever."

"If it has got to happen, why couldn't it be next Sunday?" said I. "It would save me a deal of trouble with my creditors."

He glowered at me through a tangle of heavy white eyebrows.

"Jest not with thy fate, young man," he warned. "Make not light of the holy word, for those who laugh to scorn shall be cast down into perdition and hell-flames with the everlasting damned."

Rain drops were already hissing to earth.

"Come in and put up for the night," bade I. "A little hell-fire on the hearth will feel good to the most pious on such a night as this."

"A fire on the hearth burneth before him."

With his heavy dog-eared Bible and worn saddle bags The Elder soon stamped into the living room, the rain drops asparkle on his worn fulled-cloth storm coat, on the tangle of white hair and beard.

He laid the Bible reverently on the littered table and tossed the worn, brown saddle bags into a chair. He threw aside his tattered riding coat and heavy hat and stood for a moment bowed in silent prayer, grey lips muttering,

black eyes staring ceilingward. Then he turned slowly and deliberately toward the far side of the room and with a fierce and threatening gesture, shouted:

"Out!"

He pointed a threatening finger and I followed it with anxious eyes, expecting to behold a scaly-backed, leather-winged dragon at the very least, but seeing absolutely nothing!

"Out! Out!" he roared. "Out of this friendly house. Away! Away!"

Gesticulating, shouting, exhorting, threatening, arms tossing, hands clenched into bony knobs, he advanced down the room, shouting and raving at some ghoulish phantom form which, in my fright, I could all but see cringing and whimpering in retreat before him.

"Thou Satan, prince of darkness, Beelzebub, tempter and Serpent, accursed of God—despoiler of homes and damner of souls—out! Back to that flaming hell, that loathsome pit where your millions of victims writhe and shriek in the awful agony of their repentance."

He flung open the door—wild, crazed, raving mad! In all but actual rending of clothes and giving of blows he drove this unseen and damnable Thing from my home. Outside the wind howled and tore at the treetops so that the tall cedars cried aloud with the pain of it. Dry leaves rattled and tapped with skeleton fingers against the windows. Shutters creaked and groaned and the great forest roared like an angry sea. A thick, smothering blackness fought with the flickering candlelight at the open doorway—and still I saw nothing. Back came The Elder to the fire, panting for breath, his eyes flaming large and luminously yellow in the firelight, a smile upon his grey lips.

"There, now I can sleep tonight," said he.

"But I can't!" I confessed quite honestly, "not a wink!"

"Oh, yes you can, my boy, we all sleep the better with him outside."

"But it's no way to use a poor defenseless ghost."

"Ghost!" he cried, roaring with laughter. "Ghost! Why, my lad, I was driving out Lucifer, prince of devils!"

"Oh," said I. "And you drove him right out in the rain, too. Do you think we show the proper spirit of hospitality on a night like this?"

"The devil, sir, rides the storm and sin thrives in darkness."

"I shouldn't think it would be at all necessary to drive him out of this house," I commented. "He must be bored enough to wander away by himself and there's vastly more going on, to his liking, in other homes I could mention."

"The devil is everywhere—the quieter one lives the nearer he draws to tempt and destroy. Because you cannot see this old serpent, this Satan, cannot sense his evil, do not delude yourself that he is not present. But he fears the faithful and the men of God. We know him—we see him! How the wretch scampers when I scourge him forth!"

"I don't blame him. I near jumped out of the window myself!"

I filled an extra churchwarden for The Elder. I brought him food and drink, built up the fire and in return the Old Circuit Rider told me of the old days and his visits with my grandfather.

"A big, lovable man—a man's man," commented The Elder over his pipe, "wild as the sea he loved and mad for wild adventure in strange lands. Always was he sailing

into the Southern Seas, coming back with strange cargoes and stranger tales.

"Oh, I prayed and I laboured with him, but he only laughed—and in the end the devil seized him, as I promised, and laid him by the heels."

Long after the Old Circuit Rider had retired for the night, while he lay mumbling and gritting his teeth, rolling and tossing in the deathlike stupor that seized him, I sat in the light of the dying fire thinking of my grandfather and his wild adventures.

And sitting thus, thinking of these things, I heard a slight click behind me and turned about to see the Ghost of the Manor step into the room through the secret door beside the chimney. In his maimed fist he bore a lighted candle which he placed upon the table. Evidently he thought the house deserted as he noisily dropped a pick-axe and a crow-bar on the floor. Nor did the fellow see me until I arose from the chair, The Elder's big pistol levelled at his head.

"You will do me a great favour by ceasing to use my house as a promenade. I don't mind a ghost, but you really bring in too much mud."

He wheeled like a flash, surprise stamped upon his dark features, crouched to meet an attack, and made as though to extinguish the candle.

"Not unless you want your life to go out with the flame," I cautioned and he stepped back.

It was the same thick set, dark visaged, sullen man who had laughed so loud and mirthlessly over his paper that first morning in Johann's Coffee House and who later held me up on the Post Road. His hard eyes seemed to burn like points of fire beneath their bushy brows. His heavy face was drawn with rage and I noticed that his big hands

twitched nervously, as though itching to lay hold upon me.

"Well!" he snarled. "Well!"

"So you grew tired of trying to find the rest of the key-holes," said I, over the pistol barrel.

"Shoot!" he growled, his fingers working. "Why don't you shoot?"

"Not yet, my land-locked sailor man," said I. "Not until you explain what you are doing here."

"An' what if I don't, eh?"

"Then I shall probably either shoot you where it will do the most good or kick you down the front steps."

He laughed as a man will who has seen much blood let and has no dread of physical combat.

"I understood you would not be home tonight."

"I have promised Mr. Muggin, of the stable, to throw you out of here the first time I caught you."

"Oh, ho!" he roared mirthlessly. "To throw me out, sink me!"

"Bodily—with sundry kicks duly distributed about your anatomy," I added.

"And that, my good sir," said he, seowling furiously, "I venture to say, will be somewhat of an undertaking."

"I should be ashamed to do it were you any smaller," said I. "Now kindly turn around so that I can remove your pistols."

"By the mark five!" he ejaculated as he sank weakly into a chair. "I should have finished you off the other night."

"So it was you prowling around our house the night before last?"

His dark lips drew back over worn and stained teeth in more of a snarl than a laugh.

"I remember that you began this discourteous habit of laughing at me and my misfortune some weeks ago in Johann's Coffee House."

"No," said he. "Not at your misfortune—but the story of your inheritance told me—told us—what we had wanted to know for years."

"Oh," said I, "the map and the keys?"

"We never even dreamed your Aunt had them," he sighed. "And now the map is gone again."

I took the stained old parchment from the mantel and tossed it in his lap and he snatched at it with greedy fingers.

"A whip-the-cat shoemaker found it on a dead sailor-man."

"Panay Joey!" he cried. "He murdered the captain for it!"

"And died of his wounds in the wood," I added, looking down at the tools he had dropped. "I take it that you were about to make certain excavations."

He did not answer, being engrossed in studying the map.

"Were you, by any chance, looking for a missing key-hole?"

"Well," he sighed. "I've found all the keyholes but one and I was looking for that and a couple of hundred weight of gold gods like that fellow on the mantel."

"All gone," said I. "Grandad melted them down to buy New York real estate for my cousins."

"There's still the Spanish ship—"

"If you can read the map."

"I ought to," he smiled, "I made it."

"Go ahead, my dear Scheherazade," I bade him, "and

if the story of the Spanish ship is worth it you may depart in peace,—otherwise, the sack and the Bosphorus.”

He sat with his heavy dark visaged head bowed in his strong hands speaking as though to himself, so low I could scarce understand him.

After a great deal of mumbling, I made out and have pieced together the following:

“ . . . I signed articles with your grandfather’s supercargo as cabin boy. . . . A blue nose mate from Nova Scotia. . . . Jan Budge, the bo’son . . . two Englanders and five St. Kitt’s blacks forward. . . . We worked across the gulf stream, picked up the trades and sighted Cat Island and raised Cape Maisi through winnard passage and round to Kingston without loosening even a reef point.

“ . . . At four bells of the mid watch a blow came up on a rain squall. High in the water . . . the port wheel rope jammed in the block on a lubber splice . . . she broached broadside on . . . both topgallant masts snapped at the doublings. . . . We got the top hamper cut adrift, wheel ropes cleared and headed her into it with a bit of the spanker drawing. Thirty-six hours later we had half a fathom of water in the hold and after shooting the sun laid her for Big Corn Island to careen and calk. At eight bells of the morning watch two days later we sighted land. It was not Corn Island but welcome if it was a spit o’ land in the gates o’ hell. We worked around to the west, ran in a small inlet and anchored ’till the tide marks on the beach showed a coming high tide and beached. We ran a line from the maintop to a tree on shore; as the tide went out she careened over on port side.

“Next morning all hands got out staging and rigged it over the starboard side and began calking. The cook

was ashore with his gear and tar kettle and me picking oakum.

"The second day the bo'son came back after a search for fresh water and reported a small ship high and dry in the jungle."

"Jan Budge's ship!" I cried.

"The same," he nodded. "And a weird story he made of it, scared half to death with the voodoo talk of the blacks, the uncanny island and the jungle. The men were afraid to venture beyond the beach. But the skipper was not afraid, nor was I. We soon found the Spaniard, high and dry, where she had been cast up by a tidal wave, her broken decks covered with coral and several of her old brass cannon still in place and a mouldy old skeleton hanging in her rusted chains. Through a great hole in her side the Old Man entered but he soon came out and bade me return to the ship for all the water breakers as there was a spring nearby.

"I worked most of the time rolling kegs back to the ship and getting them aboard with a jigger fall. Not until I noticed that several of the kegs did not seem to gurgle with water did I see that the end hoop of one keg had been off and on again. It aroused my curiosity. I stole back to the old ship and watched the skipper through a crevice. He had a flare and was digging with a spade in the muck and dirt in the bottom of her rotten hull. And every now and then he would turn up a dish, or a vase, or a manikin. And some of them were white like silver and some were good red gold.

"The mate reported the calking done, all gear aboard, with the anchor dropped at the mouth of the inlet and hawses lead into the capstains ready to kedge her off at the next flood tide. But the skipper was in no hurry to leave.

He wanted more of those gold dishes and images before he left. But it was not to be. Just daylight one of the anchor watch called down that he had sighted ten canoes. By the time the alarm was given the canoes were within heaving line distance. These canoes, built from logs, were about five fathoms long, manned by short, thickset Indians, all but naked, with flat faces and long black hair. They were armed with bows and arrows, spears and great saw edged swords with flint teeth.

"In a cloud of arrows the blacks raced around the capstans, picking up our kedg, while we cleared a ten pounder and passed around pistols and cutlasses. If we had not picked up a bit of wind it would have been our last voyage. Out of the dawn came a hundred great war canoes and amid the war-cries of the Indians, the thunder of the ten pounder and the *crack-crack* of pistols we set all the sail we could on the foremast. Not until the island was hull down over the stern did those war canoes leave us.

"Having had some skill in drawing at the university I had made a fair sketch of the island that could be easily identified by any sea-faring man acquainted in the Caribeen so that I could come back and get the rest of the gold. I took the compass positions and copied the latitude and longitude on the sketch, all in my native language, a little known Slavish dialect, which I was sure none of the crew could read.

"But I was not alone in my knowledge of the cargo of the Spanish galleon. While Jan Budge never suspected the treasure he had found there in the jungle, although your grandfather made him comfortable for life, the mate got suspicious of the kegs and chests, and one of the crew, brighter than the rest, also learned about the gold. But they did not know enough to take the positions and I knew

that the Captain had purposely entered them wrong in the log.

"We touched at Havana and I went ashore with the captain. And the next I remember, after that wild night, was in the forecastle of a lousy Portugese bark, bound for Tangier. I never knew what had become of my sea sketch until I read about it in the newspapers in connection with your inheritance from your grandfather's sister."

"Well, it's all very interesting," said I, "but with less than a week to live I haven't time nor inclination to go treasure hunting. Take your old map and good luck to you!"

The fever of gold was upon him, the magic lure of treasure, the old man of the sea, had him fast. Clutching the old parchment in his mutilated hand, still muttering details of his yarn he hurried out into the night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“**W**ELL, well, well, spare rigs an’ copper bottoms, I see ’s how John Bevens has come fer his wife an’ money,” announced Jan Budge, thumping his cane loudly on the brick walk to emphasize the importance of his news. “Aye, an’ now you’re driftin’ on a reef an’ th’ glass a-fallin’!”

In spite of all I could do my face grew white and drawn.

“How do you know, Jan?” I asked as calmly as I could. “Are you quite sure?”

“Sure’s shootin’! Didn’t I raise him t’ winnard with these old eyes o’ mine but yesterday?” replied Jan, indignant that I should question his source of information. “Didn’t I speak him in English a-goin’ by in his handsome coach, like a prince t’ th’ royal court, sir?”

“It is hardly evidence that he has come for a wife, Jan,” I smiled, somewhat awry.

“Th’ gear that he carried wus like a London beau, too,” continued Jan, nodding his old head knowingly. “In a plum coloured coat with siller buttons, a white figured silk westcut an’ light fawn breeches, with his two boots polished like a nigger’s heel. An’ he drops his hook right a-fore th’ Parish House, Mr. Creighton, an’ stalks inside as big as life, sir.”

“To make arrangements for the wedding, Jan?”

“Eh-heh,” nodded Jan very wisely. “Mis’ Carey, who told me, got it from Mercy Latham who ’s a second cousin o’ Ann Whitten, whose mother ’s a-workin’ fer Dominie Seelie, so y’ see I orter know, eh?”

"I guess it must be true enough, Jan, coming direct like that."

"She wus a-sayin', wus Mis' Carey, thet th' day had been sot fer next Wednesday."

"That is but a few days away, Jan!"

"Aye, aye. So it be, an' Wednesday all day, too," he grinned. "An' now if I wus you, Mr. Creighton, I'd have th' Town Crier out a-fore night t' find some one 'bout nine feet tall, an' weighin' twenty stone, some one wearin' cow-hide, copper-toed boots, who'd take a steady job by th' day."

"And what need have I for such a man, Jan?"

"T' kick a consummate fool!" he shrilled. "Thet's whut fer!"

"Oh, Jan!" I cried. "Why, why—"

"Why—you old figgerhead! 'cause you're a positive disgrace t' y'r family, you be," he snorted in disgust. "A mighty poor speciment o' a Creighton, I must say, sir! You ain't got no more way with th' wimmin than a doodle bug, y' ain't. You're slower'n a crippled snail, y' be,—no more gumption 'bout y' than a frostbit turtle. Now, if it wus y'r granddaddy, or y'r own father, sir, they'd a carried her off t' th' South Seas in a dingy but what they'd a had her, if they'd wanted her half as bad as you do, or there'd been a first class stock gambler a-ridin' in a hearse, 'stead o' t' his weddin'."

"Jan—oh, Jan!" I cried. "I did all that I could do."

"You travel with th' wimmen under jury rig with grass on your copper, sir. You wouldn't make steerage way in a n'easter. You haven't done all that a real Creighton could do," he answered, banging his cane mightily on the bricks. "Not all a big upstanding, red headed man could do, sir—not by a long shot!"

"Jan, you do not understand. This Bevens has tricked Hartwell into investing every dollar he has in the world in his top-heavy companies. And, now that Hartwell is like to lose everything, he has made his daughter believe that she can save him and their home by marrying this villain."

"By th' holy fid o' Jonah, don't thet jest beat th' sharks!" cried Jan. "You know, Mr. Creighton, I thought thet feller wus a villun all th' while."

"And, so, you see, I am helpless, Jan."

"There's big Lem Eldridge, he's out o' a job now an' maybe you could hire him fer a few days kickin'."

"Lem is too unreliable, Jan, what I need is a steady man, one who can take this work and stay by it all the while."

"Why didn't y' slip yer cable an' run away with her, eh?"

"But she doesn't love me, Jan."

"Maybe she thinks she loves duty more, eh?" grinned Jan. "Well, if you've lost her its y'r own fault, sir. Young men ain't what they wus when I wus young, not half s' brave an' dashin', an' devil-may-care with th' wimmin, sir. I 'member when last I signed with your granddaddy—"

But I did not stay to hear the details of this last cruise. Tomorrow the marriage bans would be read from the pulpit. Wednesday the ceremony would take place and Ronella would be lost to me for ever. My ears were dumb to aught else than the memory of Jan's dreadful news and my eyes were misty, blotting out the very sun itself.

Martinus was out with pretty Zara for a walk by the river and I scribbled a brief note to the effect that I had taken his horse and gone to New York for a few days and

stuck it in his shaving mirror where he would be sure to find it. Now that Ronella was to be married to my bitterest enemy I knew that the time had come for me to save my friends, if I could. Unless we won our case my days of freedom were few and, therefore, I must hasten back to New York and make arrangements for the end—whatever I decided to do to escape the gaol awaiting me.

Foxy was city bred and neighed gleefully when her head was turned towards Manhattan. And, as horses will, she travelled all the faster for this strength-giving knowledge of home. I rode with bowed head and loose rein, letting Foxy choose her own pace, my mind busy with mighty problems. "Am I a quitter?" I asked myself. "Was I afraid to play life's greatest game to the limit?" And back came the answer that Ronella did not love me and without love I certainly did not want her. Yea, even though I could ride up to Oakwood and carry her away, as my wild seafaring grandfather possibly might have done. If she preferred John Bevens all well and good, I argued, but the fact that he was her husband would not stop my hand for an instant when I came to pay my debt. Surely I meant to pay this bill!

And above me, as I rode, flap-flapped the fearsome Vampire of Despair. And ever about me, hovering near, invisible even to myself, was Love to whisper encouraging things and Pride and Honour to spur me on to greater effort and harder work.

"Only weak hearts, hearts with defects, hearts spoiled in the making, break because of unrequited love," said Pride.

"Only poor lives, unhealthy lives, lives stunted in the beginning are blighted by defeat," said Honour.

"Leave it all to me," whispered Love. "Leave it all to

me—there are always dark hours in love, and always the sun shines again.”

Foxy carried me swiftly along, passing heavily loaded ox-carts, piled high with wood and farm produce, passing coaches and carriages and even made some saddlers hit up a pretty pace to keep from tasting our dust. And in those days it was not uncommon for many a good horse to be left for ever beside the old Post Road because of the peculiar taste of the dust! When I looked up again I was riding through a wood. There were no wagons or travellers near, for a wonder, and as I swung around a sharp bend in the road, hidden by a tangle of scrub oak, which is the last to shed its leaves, I came face to face with John Bevens galloping toward Oakwood.

“Well met!” I cried hoarsely, as he yanked at the bridle to swing past.

But I wheeled Foxy in front of his horse’s nose and brought Bevens to a sudden halt, crowding him into the ditch.

“So it is you!” he cried as I snatched at his arm.

His pistol flashed in the sunlight, but by good fortune Foxy brought me near enough so that I could seize his wrist and the weapon exploded harmlessly above my head.

“Now, John Bevens, I shall pay one of my debts!” I cried.

He swung his left fist against my head in a stunning blow which left my brain befuddled for a second or two but which, strange to say, did not rob me of my strength and turn and twist as he would he could not free his wrist from my fingers—could not ride away. Swinging from the saddle in a haze of dancing lights I hauled Bevens to the ground after me and pushed him out into the middle of the road.

"Now, John Bevens!" I smiled as my eyes grew clear again. "Now I shall dress and decorate you for your wedding!"

"Touch me at your peril!" he warned, giving ground. "Don't you dare—"

"Fight, damn you!" I cursed. "You who wanted to fight so badly. Fight, or I shall beat your cowardly body black and blue."

When he saw that he was cornered, that there was no one near to lend him aid, fight he did—like a rat in the corner of a granary. He sprang upon me in a frenzy of strength, striking, kicking, and I found him no mean opponent. Beneath our fingers good cloth gave and tore, and our flying feet scattered the dry leaves and broke up the hard earth. Something struck me on the chin, rocking my head, but I felt no pain and twice my knuckles crunched into his handsome face, so that he reeled back. And each time he came at me, biting and tearing, striking and kicking, seeking to throw me, to gouge my eyes,—to disable me; but I rained short blows to his body until his breath came hissing and his mouth sagged with the pain in it. Then black madness seized me and I struck him in the face again and yet again, until his left eye was closed entirely and his nose was wrecked. And when he could no longer stand I held him by the throat against the shaggy trunk of a maple and struck him more until he sank down limp and lifeless, a bloody bundle of unconscious rags at my feet.

All crumpled up and motionless he lay in the damp ditch, beside the tree, his face red smeared and bruised with a thin red rivulet of blood running out of his broken nose, across his bony cheek and down his white neck, his clothing rent and bloody and it came over me suddenly, as I stood

there staring at my bestial work, that I had killed him. Instantly my rage vanished and in its stead came a sickening nausea and a mighty horror of the blood upon my hands.

"God!" I cried in horror, staring at this broken thing at my feet. "God, I have killed him!"

"If y' ain't, sir, it's a good sign he's mighty tough," chuckled a deep voice behind me. "Almighty damn tough, even fer a villun."

I turned slowly around, knowing that my evil work was discovered, and there stood Jolly Jack, his tool bag on his broad shoulder, his black clay pipe in his mouth.

"It were as handsome a fight 's ever I see, sir," grinned Jack. "An' I've seen a plenty. Fer a minute or two I thought he'd get th' best o' ye—oh, he wus quick on his pins an' nervy too, but yer fists be heavy, sir!"

"I've killed him, Jack!"

"Well, 't ain't no serious loss if y' have," said Jack. "Whut's one villun when th' world 's so full o' 'em, sir? Villuns be almost as thick 's shoemakers an' they're thicker'n seven in a bed. But I guess he ain't dead yet, sir. Them kind be most almighty hard t' kill—oh, fearfully hard t' kill, sir. They usual dies in bed, sir, with doctors nigh t' bleed 'em, an' ministers there t' pray for 'em, an' friends there t' keep back th' hobble-goblins an' th' fiends. They say 's how there's a villun killed every minute sir, but 't ain't enough—'t ain't nowise near enough, sir."

Jack swung his leather tool bag to the roadside and went to examine the object of my wrath. He turned Bevens over and straightened him out.

"He'll make a handsome bridegroom!" chuckled Jack,

“Oh, a perfect beaut o’ a bridegroom, sir! His eyes ’ll be black t’ his ears, an’ his nose ’ll be as flat ’s a duck’s bill, sir, an’ quite a few front teeth missin’.”

“Is, is he dead, Jack?”

“No, but he’ll wish he wus tomorrow,” answered Jack.
“He’s almighty certain t’ wish he wus tomorrow.”

Bevens gave a groan and I walked away, leading Foxy, not wishing to be there when he awakened. Some little distance down the road I mounted and rode away towards New York.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“**C**LANG—*clang—clang!*” went the old brass knocker. “Jepson, the door,” said I from the littered table where I was going over the mail.

“Oh, Master Creighton!” cried old Jepson as he turned from the chintz curtained window. “Oh, Lord love ye, Master Creighton!”

“Whatever is the matter now, Jepson?” I asked in surprise, looking up from my work.

The old man stood before me, his wrinkled face ashen, his old, mottled hands trembling in spite of the fact that he held them tightly clasped before him. His mouth hung a-gap and his watery eyes were staring.

“Oh, Master Creighton,” he gasped. “It’s th’ Jews!”

“Damn the Jews, Jepson,” I laughed. “And Jeremiah Hooper also.”

“But, but they’ve got th’ High Sheriff an’ his deputies!”

“Ah, that is more serious,” said I, jumping up and hurrying to the window. “Then Zodoc did not succeed in getting us a few days of grace.”

It was as Jepson said, the house was quite surrounded. Jeremiah Hooper and his fellow loan-sharks had brought the mighty Sheriff and his brave deputies. That they fully intended to carry me away to the debtor’s prison, unless I paid what I owed, there could be no doubt. The pompous Sheriff was a familiar figure in the town and soon a noisy crowd began to gather in the street, all anxiously awaiting to see me dragged away to gaol.

"Jepson," said I, very seriously, as I turned from the window. "Did you ever hear of a Creighton being gaoled for debt?"

"Lord love ye no, Master Creighton," he quavered. "An' I've worked for 'em all my life, sir."

"Did you ever hear of one dying in bed, Jepson?"

"Lord love ye, no! If th' seas don't get 'em, sir, which they usually does, sooner or later, they, they generally dies with th' hosses, sir—or with a pistol in their hand, sir, as a gentleman should."

"Jepson," said I very sternly, "the Sheriff is clamouring at the door for his money—or my body."

"Oh, Lord love ye, Master Creighton!"

"And so I guess he better take my body, Jepson."

The old servant stood staring helplessly at me, unable to move hand or foot.

"Jepson, my pistols," I commanded sternly.

"Oh, Lord love ye—"

"They are in the sideboard, Jepson, in the lower drawer."

"Oh, Master Creighton, not that!" he pleaded, his chin quivering.

"Better that than the gaol," I answered stiffly.

Jepson, like one in a dream shuffled slowly to the sideboard and brought out the polished mahogany and plush case containing my father's duelling pistols. I opened the box and took out one of the long, slender, silver-mounted weapons and laid it upon the table. Then I brought forth powder flask and bullet pouch from their respective compartments.

"Master Creighton," spoke Jepson in a broken voice.

"What is it now, Jepson?"

"Please, please, sir," he whispered hoarsely, "please load them both!"

"Jep!" I cried, "dear old Jep!"

"I ain't got long to live, sir, an' I never could bear to see ye carried out o' here!"

I looked up and his faded eyes were wet and misty and his gaunt frame seemed suddenly more shrunken and bowed.

"Very well, Jep," said I, "we will go together."

I measured out the proper charge of powder and poured it down the rifled barrel, then I laid a greased patch under the bullet and rammed it home. Just as I had finished loading the pistols there came a mighty roar from the front of the house and Jepson hurried to the window and peered out.

"It 's *The Badger*!" he shouted. "It 's *The Badger*, and Martinus and Zodoc are with him!"

The powder flask was upturned on the floor in my haste to get to the window. When I looked out I saw *The Badger*, Martinus and Zodoc fighting their way through a great mass of people which reached from curb to curb, completely blockading traffic.

"Make way! Make way!" roared Martinus and though the people were packed so tightly it seemed they could not be compressed another inch he shoved them right and left, heedless of their curses and protests. Behind him, *The Badger* and old Zodoc swung their canes upon the fists that were raised against them. "Make way—open up, I say!"

"Open the door!" cried Martinus as he reached the little porch. "Open the door, Barent!"

Jeremiah Hooper and the money-lenders crowded close

about Martinus, jabbering and screaming like a lot of monkeys; the High Sheriff tried to explain, but Martinus elbowed them rudely out of the way and banged upon the door with his fist.

"Open, Barent, open!"

Jepson ran down and threw back the bolts and Martinus came leaping up the stairs with *The Badger* and old Zodoc close behind him. The High Sheriff and his Deputies, Jeremiah Hooper and the other creditors came hurrying after.

"Barent!" cried Martinus, catching sight of the pistol in my hand.

"You came just in time," I smiled as I threw the loaded weapon on the table.

"Barent Creighton, I arrest you in the name of the law—" began the Sheriff as he burst into the room.

"Stand back, please," commanded *The Badger*, raising a thin hand. "Jepson, guard the door with a pistol, and keep the crowd back. Mr. Sheriff, when we want you to do any arresting we will let you know."

The Sheriff quailed before those blazing eyes and stepped back, the handcuffs jingling back into his pocket.

"Arrest that man!" cried Jeremiah from the hall. "Officer, do your duty!"

"Arrest him! Arrest him!" screamed his companions.

The Sheriff felt of the warrants in his inner pocket and gathered courage.

"Gentlemen, it is my duty—" he began.

"Not so fast!" warned *The Badger*. "Make haste slowly, man, and you will make fewer mistakes. There is still a chance that my client can pay, dollar for dollar—"

"That 's what he said a-fore," interrupted Jeremiah.

"We 're sick an' tired o' those lyin' words—give us our money!"

"Did I ever tell you that before?" cried *The Badger* sharply.

"No, but—"

"I say that my client's steamboats will be running within a month," interrupted *The Badger*. "The United States Supreme Court has just handed down a decision to the effect that the Bevens monopoly of the Hudson is illegal and shall cease to exist from date—"

"Hurrah!" cried Martinus, waving his arms wildly above his handsome head. "Oh, Barent—I knew we would win!"

I could only grasp *The Badger* by his thin hand, standing there helplessly, shaking it up and down.

"Mr. Creighton, your company is solvent," said he.

"But, our money?" whimpered Jeremiah, plucking at *The Badger's* sleeve. "Our money?"

"Keep your foul claws off me!" cried *The Badger*. "Instead of standing there like a lot of money-mad fools you might better be hurrying down to Wall Street if you have anything invested in the Bevens lines. These bloated stocks and securities will fall as flat as a flounder the minute news of this court decision leaks out."

"Ohhhhhh!" shrieked Jeremiah, his face purple, and I thought he would surely fall in a fit. "Ohhhhhh! Out o' my way—out o' my way—stand back—I must get to th' Street!"

"Mother of Christ!" gasped a white bearded Jew. "Let me out—let me out!"

Up to this old Zodoc had not spoken at all, there being few, if any, openings where he could have wedged in a

word, but now he shuffled quickly forward and seized *The Badger* by the arm.

"Is that the truth—about the court decision—or a trick?" he demanded.

"It is the truth—we have won," answered *The Badger*. "A messenger from Horatio White rode like mad into the city with the news not more than half an hour ago."

"Quick!" cried Zodoc. "Hurry—there is scarce an hour of trading left!"

"If John Bevens does not know of this decision we can strip him to his very hide!" cried Martinus, seizing his hat.

"Get a curricule—get a coach—get a horse!" cried Zodoc. "Oh, what a chance—what a rare chance—millions an' millions waiting us there—only an hour of trading—only an hour!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I FELT like a man awakening from a bad dream who rejoices to find the horrible spectre but a vision. My eyes swam in a strange mist and my throat pulsed so that I scarce could speak when I thought how empty and vain the victory after all, for this was Friday, and Ronella was lost to me for ever two days ago.

I had won—and lost all!

The hollow mockery of it unnerved me completely and I buried my head in my arms, face downward on the table.

The rumble of traffic in the busy street without beat louder and ever louder until it seemed to break into hollow, mocking laughter.

“Ho, ho, ho, ho, hoooo!” It became the chuckling voice of Despair. “Success! Success! What is success—after all?”

“It, it is just a word,” I confessed.

It was late in the afternoon, perhaps close to six o'clock, while *The Badger* and I were going over every point of the case which had altered our fortunes in a day, that the street door opened with a crash and Martinus came dashing up the stairs, followed closely by my good friends Vrooman, Bellinger and Foster. And even old Zodoc came hobbling after.

“Gold!” cried Martinus hoarsely as he dashed into the room. “Gold—yellow gold!”

Driving his hands deep into his pockets he drew them forth filled with bright yellow coins which he showered

down upon the table between *The Badger* and me. The glittering eagles tinkled and rang and jingled, rolling and raining to the floor, scurrying to all parts of the room.

"Gold!" cried Vrooman, throwing a double handful on the table.

"Gold! Gold! Gold!" they chanted and the yellow coins beat in a steady stream before my eyes, jumping into my lap, catching in the folds of my coat, caressing my fingers, splattering to the floor.

"Does not the sight of it hurt thy eyes!" cried Martinus.

"We stripped him to his hide!" chuckled Zodooc, beating a merry rat-i-tat-tat on the floor with his cane. "We stripped him to his hide—damn him!"

"We left him as naked as a plucked goose!" added Martinus.

"More than a million of dollars!" nodded Zodooc. "More than a million of dollars we took from the Bevens crowd."

"We left him with his purse empty and his heart broken!"

"We raided him as man was never raided before!"

The Badger raised slowly to his feet, his face very white and drawn, and he leaned heavily on the gold covered table.

"Are you certain that John Bevens is broken?" he asked in a hoarse and strained voice.

"He is insolvent for a million!" cried Martinus. "Tomorrow morning, when the court opens, he will face a hundred judgments and they will carry him away to the debtor's gaol—if they can find him."

The Badger sighed deeply, sank down in his chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Come, come!" I cried, "Come, come, sir, you are tired and over-wrought with all this hard work."

But he only shook his head and did not look up.

"Come, Mr. *Badger*—"

"No, no!" cried old Zodoc. "*The Badger* is no more—Thomas Kent Bennett."

"It has been many and many a year since I have heard that name," smiled *The Badger*. "Once it was an honourable name and when it was dragged in the mire I laid it reverently away and became *The Badger*. The man-monster who wrecked me and my home, who pushed me into the gutter, and kept me there for all these years, I have pulled from his high estate and cast into the gutter in turn.

"You can settle with Horatio White in person," he continued. "As for myself I want nothing more than the opportunity this case has brought. If you gentlemen will use your influence to have me restored to the bar, so that I can earn an honest living at my profession, that is all I ask."

"No!" I cried. "That is not fair."

"You shall not run away!"

"You shall be paid!"

He would not listen and started for the door but we surrounded him and pulled him back into his chair, filling the pockets of his old blue broadcloth coat with golden coins.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“**Z**ARA, pretty Zara, tell me again that you love me!” came from behind the grape arbour in the rear of *Big Nose* tavern.

“I love you, love you, my Martinus!” floated to my ears as I retreated hastily across the lawn.

“And that you will marry me, pretty Zara—my Zara!” came Martinus’ pleading voice. “Surely you will marry me, love?”

By this time I was too far away to hear her answer but I knew well enough that it was favourable, whate’er the words.

Heaving a mighty lovelorn sigh and muttering something about the phenomenal luck of some folk I knew, I entered the tap-room where Tjerck was polishing his glass-ware. The eternal card game was still in progress, defying interruption, and at the lower end of the bar, with their backs toward me, stood Jan Budge and Old Jot, glasses in hand, still wrangling.

“Zum Schnapps?” asked Tjerck, “mid gum in id?”

I nodded.

“What y’ got t’ say now, Jan Budge?” shouted Old Jot. “What y’ got t’ say now, I asks?”

“Well, there’s been a goodish bit goin’ on, Jot, but—”

“An’ now comes th’ news thet Squire Hartwell’s flat on his back with a sick spell thet may be his last, Jan. They’ve bled him twice a’ready, an’ it’s a bad sign—oh, a mighty bad sign, Jan. Sick unto death he be, all ’cause last week

he wus th' richest man in Dutchess County, Jan, an' today he's 'bout 's poor 's they make 'em. He monkeyed with th' stocks, Jan, kept diddlin' an' monkeyin' with th' stocks, an' now they've yanked his old hide off an' hung it on th' fence t' dry."

"They all gets it, sooner or later, Jot, when they monkeys with th' stocks," nodded Jan.

Martinus came hurrying in, button-holing me into a corner.

"Barent!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Barent, I'm the happiest man in the world!"

"No doubt of it at all," I laughed. "Behold in me your very antithesis."

"Zara, my Zara, has given me her promise, Barent!"

"Therefore a little Schnapps—" I suggested.

"But, Barent," he cried petulantly. "Listen—you don't seem to understand. I'm not marrying merely to acquire additional territory—I'm—I'm in love!"

"I've rather suspected as much," dryly.

"This, this is the greatest moment of my life," he sighed.

"You haven't lived very long. Have something, with wintergreen in it."

"And now, and now," he hesitated and mopped his moist brow, "and now—oh, damn it, Barent!—and now I have got to go and tell her father!"

"Be brave, Martinus," I laughed. "'I will stand on thy right hand—'"

"Oh, I'm brave enough—as far as that goes," he answered boldly. "Who wouldn't be brave with Zara's love? But, Barent, think—man, think what a blow it is for a father to lose his only daughter—and such a daughter!"

"Been going on for years and fathers of daughters ex-

pect it," said I, encouragingly. "Tjerck looks as though he could bear up under much sorrow. Hurry up now, that's a good fellow, be brave, and get it over with, it's dinner time and I am starved."

"Starved!" gasped Martinus. "Oh, I don't feel as though I could ever eat again."

"Do you feel as though you could ever drink again?"

He drank his chaser first and hurried out.

It was after dinner when I set out, heavy of heart, for Creighton Manor to call upon Mother Martha. Right where the old road enters the main highway I heard again the familiar song which ever announced the presence of Jolly Jack Rogers.

"Oh, it's all to you
And it's nothin' to me,
But sich darned actions
I don't like to see."

"Hello, Jack," I called. "Still in your old place, I see."

"Ah, yes, an' some day they'll find me here—very still," he nodded. "They'll find me here a-layin' 'side th' road—jest tumbled off my tool-kit into th' ditch, sir, stark an' dead."

"I hope it will be many a day, Jack."

"Well, I won't be on top long, sir. Last night I sees a hobblegoblin!" he puffed a cloud of smoke about his head. "It's a werry bad sign t' see a hobblegoblin."

"A hobblegoblin, Jack?"

"A hobblegoblin sure 's fate, sir. It wus light 's day with th' moon swingin' overhead like a big lamp, sir, an' right in th' highway I sees a hobblegoblin—th' firstest hobblegoblin as ever I sees, sir—an' I've been out a lot nights,

I have, in my day, sir—oh, it's a terrible bad sign t' see a hobblegoblin!"

"It is," I admitted. "I saw one once, and it certainly was a bad sign; it made my ill luck worse and spoiled my usual bad temper."

Even this did not prevent Jolly Jack from telling about his "hobblegoblin."

"There wus I sittin' on a stun, my back agin a black birch, keepin' uncommon quiet an' still, a whole troop o' fairies playin' an' rompin' an' dancin' in th' bright moonlight when, all o' a sudden, there wus a scream an' them fairies whisked 'way quick 's a wink, sir."

"The hobgoblin, Jack?"

"Th' hobblegoblin," he nodded. "First I hears it a-comin'—*stomp-stomp-stomp*—a racin' through th' leaves—*stomp-stomp-stomp*. An' with every leap it lets out a scream—oh, a mighty heartrendin' an' unearthly scream, sir. Never did mortal hear sich a scream, sir. It seemed t' hurt th' ears an' chill th' very blood, sir. An' 'tween each scream it sorta laughed—laughed loud an' long like a loon, sir—with nothin' funny 'bout it. An' screamin' an' laughin' an' a-stompin' it burst out into th' moonlight where th' fairies had been, sir—an' then I sees this here hobblegoblin plain."

"What was it like, Jack?"

"It, it wus very like a man, sir—only not a man. It came racin' straight towards me, sir, a-tearin' o' its bloody face with its claws, screamin' an' yowlin'. Fer a minute I thought it'd come t' drag me into th' pit, but I knowed if I'd sit still with m' fingers crossed it won't dare touch me, so I sits still 's a mouse, sir. Oh, it were fearsome a sight 's ever I sees, sir, with its body all torn, an' its face all bloody. Screamin' an' laughin' an' moanin' an'

a-tearin' o' its face with its claws, sir, it stops right in front o' me, stops an' listens—listens."

"Did you hear anything, Jack?"

"Nary a thing, sir, not a consarned thing, but my old heart-a-thumpin' an' a-thumpin'."

"Were you not afraid, Jack?"

"Afraid? Oh, no, sir; not with my fingers crossed an' my back agin a black birch. O' course I knowed all th' while thet it ain't real—jest a hobblegoblin, so I sits there in th' shadder, cool an' comfortable, a-watchin' an' a-waitin'. There stands Mr. Hobblegoblin in th' road, a-listenin' mighty close when, all of a sudden, I sees whut it is a-listenin' fer."

"What was it, Jack?"

"A witch, sir, a witch a-ridin' right through th' air!"

"A witch?"

"Sure's I'm a shoemaker, sir. A witch if ever there wus one. Black cat, broomstick, an' all, she came a flut-terin' down th' road, sir, old an' crooked an' bent, her grey hair streamin' out behind her, old rags flap-flappin' about her thin shanks, her eyes all a-goggle in th' moonlight, an' when she sees thet hobblegoblin she screams bloody murder, sir. This hobblegoblin jest stood there a-shakin', an' moanin' in his throat like."

"I'm afraid that was my pet hobgoblin, Jack!"

"This old witch flew into th' hobblegoblin like a fury, sir, teeth an' nail, screamin' like mad, sir. '*At last! At last!*' she screeched. '*Keep off, fiend—keep off!*' cried th' hobblegoblin. An' then he struck th' old witch on th' head with his fist, so thet she rolled in th' dust, but she wus up in a second. '*John!*' she cries, an' I sees a knife flash in th' moonlight, but th' old witch wus too much fer him—quite too much fer him. She twisted th' knife

from his fingers an' it went right through him, o' course, him bein' nothin' but a shadder. '*God—Mary!*' th' hobblegoblin cried hoarsely. '*Oh, my God—you too!*' An' with th' knife stickin' in his breast, an' his claws tearin' his hair, this hobblegoblin staggered acrost th' road an' leaps off th' cliff, sir. An' th' funny part o' th' whole business is thet I hears th' splash, sir—a loud, swishy splash, sir, an' a hobblegoblin ain't supposed t' make any splash, even if he do jump into th' river."

"So he jumped into the river, Jack?"

"Into th' river, sir—splash! with a black oath on his lips. An' after a bit I creeps up an' looks over th' cliff, sir, bein' curious about thet splash, but all I sees is th' black water lap-lap-lapping an' a smackin' o' its wet lips at th' shore, sir."

"But what became of the witch, Jack?"

"Thet's th' most curious part o' it, sir—oh, th' most curious part o' th' whole business. When I looks about th' witch had wanished, o' course, an' there stands Crazy Mary! 'Where—where am I?' she asks. 'Right where you've been these fifteen year,' says I. 'No-no! there was snow here last night—all snow and cold.' An' then she falls down in a heap, cryin' an' too weak to move, so I picks her up, an' carries her t' Mother Martha's, where she died at daylight this mornin'."

How much of Jolly Jack's strange tale was fact, and how much was fancy, I did not realize until I had come to the little log cabin and found Mother Martha and her son, the erstwhile *Badger*, alone with their dead. Bennett's long lost wife had paid her debt and was home at last.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

FAINT and indistinct as the phantom voice of a tiny wood gnome there floated to my startled ears a single sentence; indefinite, shadowy, all but unintelligible, unreal as a distant echo—as though the very hills had softly whispered it solely for my understanding.

“Punish them in Thy name, oh Lord!”

I stopped my horse in his tracks and looked about, east and west, north and south, seeing no one, discovering no human source for this mysterious wording out of nothing. On one side was the broken rail fence and tangled brush and the harvest stubble of field and meadow, bordered by the placid river, deserted and silent; to the right was the sombre spruce forest, reaching eagerly out and over the road; within were shadows black as ink spots where no sound disturbed the air. Yet so low and faint was this supernatural voice that I had half a notion I had been tricked by my own unruly imagination. The mysterious words seemed to come floating down the air lanes, light as a mote of dust in sunshine, at a moment when all the world was absolutely still. I sat there in the saddle, staring about me, straining my ears, holding my breath—and again I heard it!

“Strike! Strike! With Thy flaming sword of fire and wrath dash the iniquitous sinners into everlasting hell!”

It was but an evanescent murmur, a faint fluttering of circumambient vibrations in my ear, and yet it was undeniably a voice, a voice framing actual words, words of

potency and prayful appeal that I recognized and understood. It was a voice weird and uncanny and I cast about in every conceivable direction, with all my senses alert, to discover the source of these mysterious words.

"Fulfill Thy promise—O Lord God! Hurl this unrighteous ball of wicked dirt and flagrant sin into the nethermost pit of everlasting flame."

At last I looked up and there on a distant hilltop, where the naked cliffs defied all vegetation, I saw a diminutive figure, dwarfed by distance—a little old man with tossing arms raised to the blue heavens, white hair and beard blowing, pacing excitedly back and forth exhorting his God.

"They will not heed, these sin blackened idolators, these hellborn scoffers, they will not listen to Thy holy message. Punish them! Punish them! Bow their accursed heads with shame, break their depraved hearts with black sorrow and torment their incorrigible bodies with pain."

It was the fanatical old Elder busy with his prayers and exhortations and, as I rode on, I bethought me that this was the very day the half crazed old zealot had set aside for the end of the world.

"Well," I smiled, "he picked a nice day for it anyway."

Through a breathless air the warm autumnal sun shone fair and bright from the spotless blue above. And all outdoors lay in sombre, warm and comforting browns and golds, drowsily, serenely waiting the long and well earned rest of winter. The faded grasses and weeds by the roadside were broken and torn, their mission accomplished once again as the brown and black seeds lay scattered to the four winds in the warm earth. Ripe leaves lay thick beneath the naked trees, curling into rattling parchment, their glorious colourings fast fading. The Hudson was

like unto a river of molten lead tossing back the shafts of sunlight, marred only by the widening circles of rising salmon.

For true, it was a fine day to end the world!

I did not laugh. Doubtless there were many, scattered throughout the hills, converts of The Elder, awaiting the end in fear and trembling with many uncertainties of their journeying enroute—and ultimate destination.

The end of the world!

I sighed. The end of my little world assuredly! For, with the wisdom of Mother Martha, life is love and love is life and now that love was denied me it was, indeed, the end of the world.

Over a little knoll came a company of State Militia, bayonets gleaming in the sun, drums rolling, officers gorgeous in gay uniforms, red and white cockades and heavy gold epaulets. The Governor, by proclamation, had declared the Anti-rent counties in a state of rebellion and called out the militia to place these districts under martial law. The Anti-rent secret societies hurriedly disbanded. Indian disguises were burned and the blare of conch shells and dinner horns was heard no more throughout the land—except at high noon to summons men folk to dinner. Already the great state prison at Sing Sing was filled to overflowing with Anti-rent prisoners and once more it was safe for landlords to visit their Manor seats.

The Anti-renters were no more, but their friend and champion, Silas Wright, was as good as elected governor of the State so their great struggle for the land was won. Those impatient and dissatisfied ones, who had vowed never to pay rent again, were already streaming westward in stout covered wagons to settle the rich bottom lands along the Ohio.

The Manor house seemed unusually dark and gloomy, cheerless and dreadful. As I threw open the solid wooden shutters I was turning over in my mind the plans I had for its renovation and rehabilitment to make it livable so that I might dwell as near as possible to the pleasant scenes and associations so dear to recent memory. And when I turned around, with the details of a garden taking shape in my mind, what should I see again but the hunchback, one-eyed hobgoblin a-sitting in my chair!

I was far too ugly and despondent to be more than momentarily startled by this second visitation. And though he sat there hunched up like a spider, glaring at me with his one protruding green eye, scowling and pulling a long face, I was not frightened.

"Listen," I warned. "If you are bringing anything back, that damned map or the gold gods, I'll—"

"*He, he, he, heeee he!*" he tittered.

"Don't you *he-he-he* at me," I warned. "Not a snicker!"

"I'm not, only—*he, he, hee*—you're so—*he, he, he*—funny!"

"Funny, eh? I never felt more serious in my life!" I started toward him.

"'Ere, 'ere now! Nothin' rough—"

"One would think you belonged here!"

"I did—once," he blinked. "Oh, yes, indeed—"

"And that you didn't know it was the general custom, and one that I greatly approve, to use the knocker before walking in by the door."

"*He, he*, I didn't come in by th' door."

"And that it is a criminal offence, technically known as burglary, to break in through a window."

"I didn't come in by any windy, *he, he!*"

"Oh, you didn't eh? Well, you're going out that way—now!"

"'Ere, 'ere, now! Nothin' rough—"

"I'm laying all the ghosts," I warned. "I'm making the mysterious plain and commonplace, hidden things conspicuous, a-b-c of riddles, turning questions into answers, proving that Aunt Abigail's confidence was not misplaced, and now I'm about to demonstrate that no hobgoblin can make a monkey out of me twice!"

Gnome, ogre, dwarf, leprechaune, troll or devil, cared I not. I strode towards him, keeping a watchful eye upon his cringing shape and baneful eye, lest he vanish before I could lay hands on him, and grabbed him by the shoulder of his old out-of-date green coat.

It was good cloth, with regular flesh and bones beneath!

"'Ere, 'ere!" cried he. "Hands off! You wouldn't hurt a poor old cripple, now would you?"

"I might," I answered sullenly, with no gentle shake, "unless your tongue loosens pretty quick. What are you doing in this house?"

"Why, why, sir," he whined. "I just dropped in to—"

"Dropped in, how?"

"Through the secret passage, sir, that's how."

"Oh," said I, "so that is how you played the vanishing trick on me, eh."

"'Ere, 'ere, now, you're a hurtin' o' me arm!" he cried, twisting and squirming. "You wouldn't go for t' hurt an old man, an' him a poor cripple, would you?"

"I'll take you all apart, bone for bone, and see if I can't re-assemble you better, if you don't explain."

"Explain wot?"

"That other visit, now—"

"Didn't I give you th' keys?" he cried.

"Just when I was congratulating myself that they were gone for good!"

"My Gawd!" he cried. "You didn't want 'em?"

"No. And I'll fix that secret passageway so prowlers like you can't overrun the house."

"You're a hurtin' of me—let loose. 'Ere, 'ere now!"

With a final shake I dropped him back in the chair and stepped back to give him a chance to explain.

"And I come all th' way back here just t' do you a favour," he protested.

"And most scared me to death."

"I can't help it, can I?" he screamed. "I can't help how I look, can I?"

I had to admit that this was so.

"What favour?" I asked.

"Why, sir, th' map!"

"Don't—don't you dare!" I cautioned.

But he drew the bit of folded parchment from his inner pocket and I snatched it from his hand and cast it in the open fire.

"My Gawd!" he cried, attempting to save it.

But I held him fast until the hateful thing was but a bit of charred ash.

"You've flung away a fortune!" he gasped.

"It isn't the first."

"There's still th' hidden gold—"

"I don't want to hear about it," I cried out in disgust. "I'm tired of Spanish ships and Inca gods, and mouldy old maps, and secret passageways and missing keyholes—and everything! The next person that says gold to me I shall answer with lead. If there's any gold around here findings is keepings, go and get it—only string your words on some other subject."

"It's here. It's here," he shook his big head knowingly.

"There's nothing here but the holes you old fools have made prying and digging about the place. I don't want any gold and I won't have you crazy old bedlamites prowling around."

"I know it's here!" he cried. "Wasn't I your grandfather's clerk and bookkeeper in the old warehouse?"

Then I remembered this fellow. It was none other than Jakie Boohart, my grandfather's clerk, of whom I was always afraid as a child.

"Didn't I help him melt up th' gold gods, th' soup plates and wash dishes of those old Inca heathens—"

"Yes, and grandfather left you a house and lot in New York and an annuity of five hundred dollars a year."

"But there's more of them gold gods an' dishes here—"

"Enough!" I cried.

"But, sir—"

"Vamoose, get, scud—"

"But, sir!"

"I don't want to hear any more. The very thought of hidden treasure turns my stomach. Make haste, vanish—get out!"

I led him, protesting, kicking and squirming to the door and thrust him outside.

"I'll get y' for this!" he screamed from the road, "I'll get y' for this—an y' won't be th' firstest one old Jakie's got either!"

Which I doubt not was the truth.

"If I catch you here again," I warned, "you'll vanish—completely!"

As soon as Jakie had run off down the road, presumably to get something, or somebody, to "get" me, I determined

to make an end of all this out-of-date secret business. I had all I wanted of people popping in and out of my house through the walls. I grabbed up the crow-bar and pick-ax, left by him of the maimed fist, and started on my errand of destruction.

The first thing I did was to spike the tunnel entrance in the old warehouse so tight that the stairway could not be moved without a wrecking crew. Then I closed the iron door and heaped against it a great pile of earth and stones, upturned by the treasure hunters.

With my crow-bar I attacked the walls of the room to get more stone to block the passageway. One particular stone of large dimensions in the side wall seemed heavy enough for my purpose. With the steel crow-bar I tried to pry it out. At the third stroke it loosened and toppled slowly outward, so that I jumped aside in alarm. But, much to my surprise, it swung slowly out like a door—and when I looked closer I saw that it was a door! This bit of wall was built into a concealed iron frame, mounted on hinges, and closer examination disclosed the last missing keyhole.

Candle lanthorn in hand I stooped and stepped within a small vault. There upon the floor, damp and musty, were the very worm-eaten, brass bound kegs my grandfather had taken from the Spanish ship laden with soft Peruvian gold. All of these were empty save one, and that was filled with Indian ornaments and jewelry—all of soft fine gold. There were many little gold gods similar to those of the lacquered box. There were chains and necklaces, bracelets and leg bands, breastplates wrought in hieroglyphics, vases and pots quaintly decorated, knives and bodkins and toilet articles—just as the Spanish *conquistadores* had plundered them from the murdered Inca

lords. In all, I should judge, there was at least one hundredweight of it.

On a little shelf above the sea chests were row on row of little metal bars. I blew the dust of years from them and they glistened like solidified sunlight. They were the ingots my grandfather and old Jakie had melted down and cast.

There in that little chamber was more than \$200,000 worth of yellow gold but I did not thrill with joy at the discovery. Money did not mean anything to me now. So I closed the secret door carefully behind me, and went back to the Manor house, wondering why Aunt Abigail felt so sure I would unravel this family mystery.

CHAPTER FORTY

I CLIMBED upon a great shelving rock below the Manor house and looked out over the tops of the trees to the Hudson far below and on its silvered bosom I saw a tiny boat, small by perspective, with a wisp of black smoke belching from its stack as it breasted the current. And from the masthead of this boat floated the pennant of our steamboat company. Every morning one of these gay steamers left the port of New York for Albany, touching at all important towns along the way, and every morning another steamer left Albany for the return trip. Our steamer "Swallow," as fast as those darting swifts of the air from which it takes its name, already held the coveted river record for the quickest time between the two ports.

I sighed mightily. Success was so empty!

From my rocky seat memory whirled time backward and I lived again those wonderful, golden hours with Ronella. I saw her as she stepped from the coach in the soft moonlight, when first she came into my life, laughing, excited with adventure, unafraid; so different from the timid, downcast maidens of my acquaintance. And I found myself dwelling upon the straight line of her cheek from brow to chin, the way her dark eyes changed with every mood and the little trick her arched red lips had of opening to show the white teeth within whenever she was in serious thought.

How soon our little world of romance had ended.


Now, as The Elder's words came back to mock me, in

anger I leaped from the rock, crunching my pipe beneath my heel, curses on my tight lips, damning myself for a sneaking coward, a fool of fools, even as Jan Budge had said to my very face. I hated myself, loathed weak flesh and the weaker spirit. Why, why had I not done something—anything!—to win her?

I felt that I must walk, run! And as my unguided and aimless feet carried me swiftly through the silent wood I struck cruelly at the bushes along the way with my stick, breaking down twigs and limbs and wantonly destroying.

Down a deeply worn deer trail I hurried, knowing not, caring not, where my anger took me so long as it was ever and ever deeper into the silent wood, far from all familiar sights, far from every human tainted thing. And a hundred things that I still might do to redeem myself, the chances and the prospects that still remained to make life at all worth enduring, flashed again and yet again, in endless procession through my fevered brain—all so useless and hopeless! But, above all, there persisted, in monotonous reiteration, this single sentence: "*Ronella does not love me! Ronella does not love me!*" And shrouded Despair, a skeleton in a black winding sheet, stalked behind me, dogging my footsteps.

Soon a vast company of mighty spruces shut out the very sky, and obscured the light of day. It was such another place as that to which birds and beasts retire with the spell of death upon them. Between the great boles of the trees, picketed with dead limbs, with skeletons of tiny bushes overpowered and strangled by the stygian darkness, I strode with the black shadows clutching at my elbow and the foul banshees of a tormented mind fluttering about my ears. It was as though my dark and dismal thoughts thus tolled me to their very source there in the dank and



damp spruce grown hollow, as though the hope that was dying within me, with primitive instinct, sought thus a secret place for the end.

But soon I came to a rise of ground where the firs gave way to naked hardwoods and the golden sunlight filtered and sprayed to the leaf covered forest floor, and I ran, as from an evil thing, out into the light where I could see the blue sky above and breathe the sweet dry air again. And from the shadow-haunted darkness the goblins, fearing the sun, shrieking after me from the gloom, cursed and jeered and taunted me until I was well out into the broad light of day where Confidence and Faith returned to give me strength.

I found myself in a wood road, near the edge of the forest, knowing not where I was, whether on the Manor farm or no. A step or two down the road, out of the wood into the dazzling splendour of day, and I saw before me, but a little way across the tilled land, the clustering buildings of Oakwood Manor among the gaunt trees. I looked around to see just how far I was from home and there, standing by a great rock, with trees and brush growing like a hanging garden on its crown, was Ronella Hartwell looking out toward Creighton Manor.

"Ronella!" I cried in surprise. "Ronella!"

She stared at me wide-eyed, hands clutched in the front of her dress.

"Ronella!" I cried again.

"Barent!" her voice was almost a whisper. "Oh, Barent Creighton, is it really you?"

"It is I, Ronella," I came quickly forward, my beaver in my hands. "Of the flesh, and, oh, Ronella! how can I tell you how glad I am to see you and how sorry we all are that misfortune has overtaken you?"

"It is so strange, so wonderful, to see you here—today," she answered slowly. "I did not expect—ever—after what I said—what I did—"

"The gods are kind to me—they have much to atone for!"

"I thought you had gone back to your great city."

"Merely to disappoint the High Sheriff and surprise certain money-lenders with their due."

She stood for the longest time, (perhaps it just seemed long to o'er anxious youth!) looking out on the autumn landscape, head bowed, her nervous fingers intertwining. And so I knew that her mind was heavy with important confidences without words for a suitable beginning. Remembering that her father had suffered a stroke with the loss of his beloved land I sought to comfort her.

"I hope your father is better."

"Thanks," she smiled faintly. "He is much better now. The stunning effect of great losses wears away with time."

"You have lost much, Ronella!"

"Everything," she nodded, "even the Manor must go in a few weeks."

"Not your home, Ronella?"

"Our home," her voice was very low and sad, "and, and everything!"

I whistled louder than Tug Muggin in surprise and as I did so my fingers came in contact with the once mysterious keys in my coat pocket, which imparted to me a very brilliant idea.

"If you will come over to my house with a basket," I began, "I will be glad to give you enough gold to, ah, liquidate this indebtedness, and, and save your home."

"Please, please don't jest—" she smiled faintly.

"Rumpletestiltskins is my name," I continued, "I have

a dozen maidens spinning gold for me out of straw and I was never more serious in my life."

"Then I suppose you have married your acres."

"No," said I. "Granddad took this gold from an old Spanish ship somewhere in the South seas. A ship, as I remember, high and dry in the jungle, with a mahogany, or a rosewood, or some kind of a tree, growing right up through a jagged hole in her broken hull and a mouldy old skeleton a-hanging in her rusty chains."

"You mock me," she cried, straightening up with flashing eyes. "If you have come here to—"

"I have come to help you if I can," I interrupted. From my waistcoat pocket I pulled the little gold god of my destiny, and handed it to her. "I offer this bit of junk as evidence that I have the aforesaid gold and that, in all seriousness, I will give you a—er—basketful!"

"It is hideous."

"Most gods are," I explained.

"And wicked."

"It is but a piece of gold—an Inca god—wicked only in looks. They kissed it seven times in the full of the moon and offered up broken hearts as sacrifices."

"The god of what?" she asked.

"I thought, for a long time, that it was the god of bad luck but now, I think, I am quite sure, that it is the god of, of love, Ronella."

"I am sure that even the Inca gods cannot help me."

"But, I really have this useless gold—" I began.

"Then you do not have to marry your acres."

"No," said I studying her, failing to understand her mood, "—the courts have decided that I have a right to run my steamboats on the Hudson and I do not have to marry my acres, or, or any one, unless I am so minded."

When she spoke again her voice had grown hard and cold.

"I am glad you do not have to marry—any one!"

"It is quite a relief," I admitted, "not to, not to *have* to marry a certain—ah—woman—for—ah—a certain number of acres, be the same more or less."

"Yes," said she. "It must be."

All this time we had been slowly walking toward the Hartwell home. When we came to the little stone bridge near the house I stopped to take my leave. And though sadness banished the sparkle from her eyes and the smile from her lips even in this sadness seemed she more beautiful.

"I am sorry, for your sake, Ronella, that, that—"

Her head bent lower; I could see that her dark eyes were swimming.

"—that for me to win, to succeed—your father, and John Bevens had to suffer, so much. Not that I have forgiven Bevens, or regret that we—we had certain differences, and sometimes came to blows. But for your sake, Ronella—I am truly sorry."

She did not answer and it was not hesitating over words that her lips trembled.

"And I really have more yellow gold than I know what to do with," I continued. "So, if you will get your basket, or accept—"

"No," said she. "The Hartwells, at least, have not lost their pride."

"Is there no way I can help?"

"There is more to life, sir, than gold."

"I am afraid, Ronella," misunderstanding her entirely, "it is beyond the power of any one to raise John Bevens to his feet again—"

"I am afraid it is," said she.

"You see, he was so deeply involved and had so many enemies, besides myself, and his debts—"

"Are all paid," she answered softly.

"Er—paid, Ronella?"

"Yes," said she. "John Bevens has paid. He threw himself in the river last night."

Then I knew for the first that Jolly Jack's "hobblegoblin" had been none other than John Bevens and that he had also paid the price of crazed Mary's youth along with his other debts.

"I am sorry, Ronella, that marriage did not save your home."

"Marriage, sir?"

"That your husband, Ronella,—"

"Husband?" she turned her pretty head away, and I thought I saw a ghost of a smile upon her lips.

Unbelievably slow of wit am I, so that not until the question in her voice aroused me did I note that no golden band of wedlock encircled the third finger of her left hand.

"Ronella!" all other words failed me.

"He, met with an accident, on the way to the wedding," she explained. "He sent word—asked for a postponement—and now he is, is dead!"

It was as though some one had opened an inner door and all the evil things inside me flew away like a string of bats from a cavern, leaving me as sweet and clean as a new house with the sunlight pouring in every window.

"He certainly met with a terrible accident," I smiled. "Very suddenly and unexpectedly he ran against what was coming to him!"

"And now I am glad this, this accident occurred," she

continued, "because, because now I know that I could not have saved my home, or father, or anything, by marrying—any one."

"I'm not so sure about that," I answered seriously. "There is a certain—er—knave,—er—ogling macaroni,—er—man of fashion,—a certain money-mad, uncultured fool, with more gold than brains—"

"Oh, Barent!" she blushed.

"It would not, by any means, be marrying a poor man, encumbered as he is by certain valuable steamboats, a comfortable fortune and a large quantity of miscellaneous gold—"

"Oh, Barent, you do punish me!"

"And holding, as trustee, an added inducement of five thousand acres of landscape ready to transfer to his wife."

"It is cruel of you!"

"Even though you do not love him, marriage would save your home and do much to restore your father's health."

"You, you do but jest."

Perhaps it was the tremulous note in her voice; mayhap her very humble attitude as she stood, with bowed head and wet eyes, turned away from me—

Taut was I for opposition and a great show of strength, for blows and bitter words, but instead, with a little sigh she yielded her forehead to my shoulder, her splendid body, soft and warm, a-tremble in my arms.

"He offers also, that which is more precious than Inca gold, Ronella, more valuable than Manor farms—the greatest love in all the world."

"The greatest love but one, Barent!" she whispered.

POSTSCRIPT

Late that evening when, with light step and singing heart, I neared the quaint old tavern in the village mine ears were assaulted by a wild chorus of harsh laughter and loud shouting, above which I easily distinguished the double bass roar of the mighty Tjerck and the shrill treble of Jan Budge.

"This 's th' last day, Tjerck, th' last day fer this here wicked world—an' most gone a'ready!"

"This leetle ol' ball o' sin—*oh, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha*,—is a-goin' t' drap right in th' sun t' day, boys."

"This 's th' werry day, Jot," shrilled old Jan, "th' werry time an' place when he wus a-goin' t' scuttle her!"

A dishevelled old man, kicking his booted heels into a pokey old white horse, trotted past me, beaver jammed over his ears, hunched up as though to conceal himself in the wide velvet collar of his old black coat, face turned towards the west. I spoke, but he did not answer. He was muttering crazily in his tangled white beard, a fleck of foam on his ashen lips, his dark eyes rolling wildly in their cavernous sockets—it was the fanatical old Elder.

"Der last ends ov efferding!" roared Tjerck. "Der ends ov efferding!"

AND SO, THOUGH THE END OF THE WORLD CAME NOT, NOR IS LIKE TO COME FOR MANY A DAY, THIS IS THE END, THE VERY END OF WHAT IS (OH, I FEAR ME!) BUT ANOTHER TIRE-SOME AND TEDIOUS STORY!













